

OLD LOVE STORIES
RETOLD

BOOKS BY RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

- PROSE FANCIES. First Series. With Portrait of the Author by WILSON STEER.
- THE BOOK BILLS OF NARCISSUS: an Account rendered by RICHARD LE GALLIENNE. With a Frontispiece.
- ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON: AN ELEGY AND OTHER POEMS, MAINLY PERSONAL.
- ENGLISH POEMS.
- GEORGE MEREDITH: Some Characteristics. With a Bibliography (much enlarged) by JOHN LANE. Portrait, etc.
- THE RELIGION OF A LITERARY MAN.
- RETROSPECTIVE REVIEWS: A LITERARY LOG, 1891-1895. 2 vols.
- THE QUEST OF THE GOLDEN GIRL: a Romance.
- THE ROMANCE OF ZION CHAPEL.
- RUDYARD KIPLING: a Criticism. With a Bibliography by JOHN LANE.
- SLEEPING BEAUTY, AND OTHER PROSE FANCIES. PAINTED SHADOWS.
- THE RUBÁIYÁT OF OMAR KHAYYÁM: a Paraphrase. New Edition.
- LITTLE DINNERS WITH THE SPHINX. NEW POEMS.
- OCTOBER VAGABONDS. With numerous Illustrations by THOMAS FOGARTY.
- ATTITUDES AND AVOWALS.
- THE LONELY DANCER: Poems.
- THE SILK HAT SOLDIER, AND OTHER POEMS. Paper covers.

THE BODLEY HEAD

Acc 8121

75

81
74

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

By RICHARD LE GALLIENNE

125

HYDERABAD
STATE LIBRARY

Checked
1987

JOHN LANE THE BODLEY HEAD LIMITED
VIGO STREET, LONDON, W. 1

Acc. No.	8121
Class No.	F. 7.
Book No.	358

823
GAL

First Published in 1924

UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
LIBRARY

TO
CHARLES HANSON TOWNE
MY FRIEND

THE Publishers are indebted to Mr. John Murray for permission to quote extracts from *The Browning Love Letters* (*The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Browning*) and *The Life and Letters of Robert Browning* by Mrs. Sutherland; and to Messrs. Macmillan and Co., Limited, for permission to quote extracts from *The Life of Michelangelo Buonarroti* by J. A. Symonds.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
I. DANTE AND BEATRICE	I
II. AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE	16
III. SIR PHILIP SIDNEY AND LADY PENELOPE DEVEREUX	27
IV. SHELLEY AND MARY GODWIN	44
V. JOHN KEATS AND FANNY BRAWNE	58
VI. HEINE AND MATHILDE	69
VII. FERDINAND LASSALLE AND HELENE VON DÖNNIGES .	84
VIII. ABÉLARD AND HÉLOÏSE	112
IX. ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT .	128
X. FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND	168
XI. MICHAEL ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA	200
XII. DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND ELIZABETH SIDDAL .	224
XIII. MARY STUART AND PIERRE CHASTELARD	248
XIV. LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS	272
XV. "EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?"	287

(An Excursus on an Ancient Controversy.)

OLD LOVE STORIES
RETOLD

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

I

DANTE AND BEATRICE

THE great historic love stories of the world are like the great classics of art and literature. They have become universal symbols of human experience. There are many ways of loving, many shapes of story taken by the fateful passion of love in a difficult world, which, though it may love a lover, seldom shows its love in the form of active sympathy while the story is in the making. The great love stories fix either the type of loving after the manner of one or another temperament, or the type of dramatic expression imposed upon love by circumstance. Thus the story of Tristram and Iseult stands for a love irresistibly passionate, stormily sensual, a very madness of loving. It represents a quality of, a way of, loving. The significance of the story of Paolo and Francesca, on the other hand,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

is less in the love of the lovers themselves than in the shape of destiny which it took under the pressure of circumstance. Lanciotto is no less important, is even more important, to the story than the lovers themselves, whereas in the case of Tristram and Iseult we never give a second thought to King Mark. Our eyes are held by the spectacle of the superb passion of the lovers, as by some awe-inspiring display of the elements. The love of Paolo and Francesca, however, strikes no individual characteristic note—the lovers themselves have no personality—and it is merely one of the elements in the making of a picturesque shape of tragedy, a shape which, before and since, love-history has been constantly taking, and to which in the case of Paolo and Francesca the genius of a great poet has given an accidental immortality.

Dante's own love-story belongs to the first, more significant, class. His love for Beatrice is important because it stands for a way of loving. As many have loved and still go on loving the way of Tristram and Iseult, so many have loved and still go on loving Dante's way, though such a fashion of loving is perhaps less common. Yet, it is so rare, after all, for a man to carry enshrined in his heart from boyhood to manhood, and on to old age, the holy face of some little girl seen for a brief while in the magic dawn of life, lost almost as soon as seen, yet seen in that short moment

DANTE AND BEATRICE

with such an ecstasy of sight as to become for him a deathless angel of the imagination, a life-long dream to keep pure the heart ?

A poet's love is apt to be a lonely, subjective passion, even when it is returned ; for the woman whom the poet loves is often as much his own creation as one of his own poems. Like Pygmalion he loves the work of his own dreams. But never was any poet's love—not even that of John Keats for Fanny Brawne—so entirely one-sided as that of Dante for Beatrice. Save as the object of Dante's worship, Beatrice has no share in the story at all. She seems to have had no more care for Dante's love, and indeed to have been hardly more aware of its existence, than a new star has care for, or is aware of, its discoverer. "The beloved," says Hafiz, "is in no need of our imperfect love." Dante was free to worship her afar off if he pleased. It was not her fault if she preferred the less portentous attentions of the society young fellows of her set. A lover like Dante might well bewilder, and even alarm, a young miss, whose thoughts, for all her mystical beauty, ran—innocently and properly enough—on her sweetmeats and her next dance. But, if that saying of Hafiz be true, it is open to the retort that a lover like Dante can dispense with a return of his affection. All he asks is to dream his dream. To have his love returned might be disastrous to his dream.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

It is no mere flippancy to suppose that had Dante had fuller opportunities of knowing the real earth-born Beatrice, the divine Beatrice would have been lost to him and to us. Fortunately, their intercourse seems to have been of the slightest. For Beatrice, Dante was hardly more than an acquaintance, who, after the fashion of his day, paid court to her in sonnet and ballata—forms of devotion at that time hardly so serious as a serenade. For it was the period of the courts and colleges of love, when a poet might write in the name of a strictly poetical "mistress," with hardly more thought of scandalous realities behind his song than if to-day a poet should dedicate his new volume, by permission, to some noble lady. Dante's uniquely beautiful record of his love-story, the "Vita Nuova," is cast in just that formal fanciful mould of literary and mystical love-making which was then fashionable, and were it not that the form of it is quite powerless to suppress the intense sincerity and youthful freshness of an evidently real feeling, it might have passed for a brilliant piece of troubadour make-believe. As it is, however, the very artificiality of the form is turned to account, and seems rather to accentuate than detract from the impression of youthful ecstasy. Young love is ever curious to invent some form of exquisite ritual for the expression of its worship. Common words are not rare enough for the fastidious young

DANTE AND BEATRICE

priest who thus bows his head in the awful sanctuary of his first love. So the very artifice with which in the "Vita Nuova" we see Dante delighting to fret little golden "chambers of imagery" for the honey, and delicate lachrimatories for the sorrow, of his love, is in itself an added touch of reality.

Very youthful and lover-like is the vein of mystical superstition which runs through the confession, as, for example, the insistence on the number nine in the opening sentences and throughout. Not without hidden significance, it seemed to the young poet, was it that he should have met Beatrice when she was almost beginning her ninth year and he almost ending his. Here alone was an evidence that they were born for each other. Who can forget his hushed account of his first meeting with that "youngest of the angels" ?

"Nine times already since my birth had the heaven of light returned to the selfsame point almost, as concerns its own revolution, when first the glorious Lady of my mind was made manifest to my eyes, even she who was called Beatrice by many who knew not wherefore. She had already been in this life for so long as that, within her time, the starry heaven had moved towards the eastern quarter one of the twelve parts of a degree ; so that she appeared to me at the beginning of her ninth year almost, and I saw her almost at the end of my ninth year. Her dress, on that

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

day, was of a most noble colour, a subdued and goodly crimson, girdled and adorned in such sort as best suited with her very tender age. At that moment, I say most truly that the spirit of life, which hath its dwelling in the secretest chamber of the heart, began to tremble so violently that the least pulses of my body shook therewith; and in trembling it said these words: *Ecce deus fortior me, qui veniens dominabitur mihi* [Here is a deity stronger than I; who, coming, shall rule over me].”

It is probable that this historic meeting thus mystically described had come of Dante's father one day taking the boy with him to a festa—or, as we should say, a party—given by his neighbour Folco de Portinari. Dante's father was, it would appear, a well-to-do lawyer, with old blood in his veins, but still of the burgher class; whereas Portinari was probably richer and in a higher social position.

Another nine years was to pass before Dante and Beatrice were even to speak to each other—for it does not appear that they had spoken at that first meeting—and by that time she had been given in marriage to a banker of Florence, one Simon de Bardi. Meanwhile, Dante may have caught glimpses of her in church or in the street, but beyond such slight sustenance his love had had nothing to feed on all those years. Once again Dante dwells on the recurrence of

DANTE AND BEATRICE

the significant number nine in his history. "After the lapse," says he, "of so many days that nine years exactly were completed since the above-written appearance of this most gracious being, on the last of those days it happened that the same wonderful lady appeared to me dressed all in pure white, between two gentle ladies elder than she. And passing through a street, she turned her eyes thither where I stood sorely abashed; and by her unspeakable courtesy, which is now guerdoned in the Great Cycle, she saluted me with so virtuous a bearing that I seemed then and there to behold the very limits of blessedness. The hour of her most sweet salutation was exactly the ninth of that day; and, because it was the first time that any words from her reached mine ears, I came into such sweetness that I parted thence as one intoxicated."

What were the words, one wonders, that sent the poet walking on air through the streets of Florence, and shut him up in the loneliness of his own room to dream of her, and to write mystical sonnets for the interpretation of his fellow poets, as was the manner of that day? They can hardly have been more than a "Good morning, Messer Alighieri. We have missed your face in Florence for ever so long." But then the voice and the smile that went with the ordinary words! It almost seems as though they must have conveyed a rarer message to the poet's heart. Or did the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

poet merely misinterpret according to his hopes an act of conventional graciousness ?

It is to be feared that he did. But, be that as it may, that "most sweet salutation" sufficed so to fan the flame of love in the poet's heart that he grew thin and pale from very lovesickness, so that his friends began to wonder at him and make guesses at the lady. Dante, perceiving this, and seeing that he must protect Beatrice from any breath of gossip, conceived the plan of making another lady the screen for his love. It chanced that, one day Dante being in the same church with Beatrice, a lady sat in a direct line between Beatrice and himself, and, as she looked round at him several times, and his eyes, in reality burning upon Beatrice, might well seem to be answering hers, the gossips concluded that she it was who had brought him to such a pass of love. Becoming aware of the mistake, Dante saw in it the needed means of shielding Beatrice, and he diligently set about confirming the gossips in their error by writing poems which seemed to point to the other lady, but were in reality inspired by Beatrice. At this time, he tells us, he made a list in the form of a "sirvente" of the names of the sixty most beautiful women in Florence, and he bids us take note of a strange thing: "that having written the list, I found my lady's name would not stand otherwise than ninth in order among the names of these ladies!"

DANTE AND BEATRICE

In course of time, travel took his beautiful "screen" from Florence, and it became necessary for him to find a substitute. This he was presently enabled to do, and soon he became so identified with his fictitious lady, and rumour began to speak such evil of them both, that his own true lady, "the destroyer of all evil and the queen of all good," meeting him one day, denied him her salutation. Thereupon, in bitter grief, Dante took counsel of Love, and composed a veiled song which should reveal the truth to Beatrice and yet hide it. But how she received it, or whether or not she took him back into her favour, is not made clear. It hardly seems as though she had done so, from the next occasion on which we see them in each other's company. This was one of great sorrow and bitterness, and is described so vividly by Dante himself that I will transcribe his own words :

"After this battling with many thoughts, it chanced on a day that my most gracious lady was with a gathering of ladies in a certain place ; to the which I was conducted by a friend of mine. . . . And they were assembled around a gentlewoman who was given in marriage that day ; the custom of the city being that these should bear her company when she sat down for the first time at table in the house of her husband. Therefore I, as was my friend's pleasure, resolved to stay with him and do honour to those ladies.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

“ But as soon as I had thus resolved, I began to feel a faintness and a throbbing at my left side, which soon took possession of my whole body. Whereupon I remember that I covertly leaned my back unto a painting that ran round the walls of that house ; and being fearful lest my trembling should be discerned of them, I lifted mine eyes to look upon those ladies, and then first perceived among them the excellent Beatrice. And when I perceived her, all my senses were overpowered by the great lordship that Love obtained, finding himself so near unto that most gracious being, until nothing but the spirits of sight remained to me. . . . By this, many of her friends, having discerned my confusion, began to wonder ; and, together with herself, kept whispering of me and mocking me. Whereupon my friend, who knew not what to conceive, took me by the hands, and drawing me forth from among them, required to know what ailed me. Then, having first held me at quiet for a space until my perceptions were come back to me, I made answer to my friend : ‘ Of a surety I have now set my feet on that point of life beyond the which he must not pass who would return.’ ”

From that moment Dante’s passion was an open secret among his acquaintance, and his lovelorn looks were matter of jest among them. We read of no more meetings with Beatrice, except a chance encounter in the street as she

DANTE AND BEATRICE

walked with a beautiful friend named Joan. Whether she gave or withheld her salutation on this occasion, Dante does not tell us. Meanwhile, her father had died, and Dante had written her a poem of sympathy; also he himself had been so sick that thoughts of death had come close to him, and with them a prophetic vision of the death of Beatrice, all too soon to be fulfilled. Dante tells how he was busied with a long, carefully conceived poem in celebration of her beauty and her virtue, and had composed but one stanza, "when the Lord God of justice called my most gracious lady unto Himself, that she might be glorious under the banner of that blessed Queen Mary whose name had always a deep reverence in the words of holy Beatrice." Heaven had ✓ need of her. Earth was no fit place for so fair a spirit.

A love such as Dante's, dream-born and dream-fed, and never at any time nourished on the realities of earthly loving, would necessarily be intensified by the death of the beloved. That mysterious consecration which death always brings with it especially transfigures the memories of the young and the beautiful. She had come nearer to him rather than gone farther away. So, at least, he could feign in his imagination, where he was now free to enthrone her for ever as the bride of his soul—without the thought of any Simon de Bardi to break in upon his dream. In life she could

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

never be his, but in her death they were no longer divided.

Yet before this dream could grow into an assured reality for him, bringing firmness and peace to his heart, there were many months of bitter human grief to pass through. Beatrice was indeed a saint in heaven, but ah! she no longer walked the streets of Florence. Like any other bereaved lover, he sought many anodynes for his grief—some unworthy ones, for which his conscience reproached him at the time and long years after. With the instinct of the poet, he first sought the consolation of beautiful words. As some men fly to wine in sorrow, the poet flies to verse. “When my eyes,” he says, “had wept for some while, until they were so weary with weeping that I could no longer through them give ease to my sorrow, I bethought me that a few mournful words might stand me instead of tears. And therefore I proposed to make a poem, that weeping I might speak therein of her for whom so much sorrow had destroyed my spirit; and I then began ‘The eyes that weep.’”

“Beatrice is gone up into high Heaven,
The kingdom where the angels are at peace;
And lives with them: and to her friends is dead.

“Not by the frost of winter was she driven
Away, like others; nor by summer-heats;
But through a perfect gentleness, instead.
For from the lamp of her meek lowlihead

DANTE AND BEATRICE

Such an exceeding glory went up hence
That it woke wonder in the Eternal sire,
Until a sweet desire
Entered Him for that lovely excellence,
So that He bade her to Himself aspire ;
Counting this weary and most evil place
Unworthy of a thing so full of grace.

“Wonderfully out of the beautiful form
Soared her clear spirit, waxing glad the while ;
And is in its first home, there where it is.
Who speaks thereof, and feels not the tears warm
Upon his face, must have become so vile
As to be dead to all sweet sympathies. . . .”

Later, he tells us how he found consolation in the sympathy of a certain “young and very beautiful lady,” consolation so tender and kind that he confesses, in self-reproach, that his “eyes began to be gladdened overmuch by her company, through which thing many times I had much unrest, and rebuked myself as a base person.”

That he also experimented with the commoner anodynes of grief seems certain from this stern sonnet addressed to him by his first of friends, Guido Cavalcanti :

“I come to thee by daytime constantly,
But in thy thoughts too much of baseness find :
Greatly it grieves me for thy gentle mind,
And for thy many virtues gone from thee.
It was thy wont to shun much company,
Unto all sorry concourse ill inclin'd :
And still thy speech of me, heartfelt and kind,
Had made me treasure up thy poetry.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

But now I dare not, for thine abject life,
Make manifest that I approve thy rimes ;
Nor come I in such sort that thou mayst know.
Ah ! prythee read this sonnet many times :
So shall that evil one who bred this strife
Be thrust from thy dishonoured soul and go."

That Guido Cavalcanti did not write thus without cause, is proved by Beatrice's solemn reproach of him in the "Purgatorio." Indeed, she implies that his way of life at this time was the cause of his vision of the Inferno :

"So low he fell, that all appliances
For his salvation were already short,
Save showing him the people of perdition."

In the same poem he admits :

"The things that present were
With their false pleasure turned aside my steps,
Soon as your countenance concealed itself."

But, through all, the dream of his love was growing more bright and sure ; and soon it was to ascend above all earthly fumes, and shine down on him, the fixed guiding star of a life that, in its turbulent vicissitudes and bitter sorrows, was, more than most, to need the sustaining light of such a spiritual ideal.

Dante was to marry, and his wife Gemma was to bear him seven children—a wife who cannot have been unsympathetic to his dream, for she allowed him to name their daughter Beatrice ;

DANTE AND BEATRICE

Florence was to become the second passion of his life ; he was to descend into hell, and eat the bitter bread of exile : but through all, growing brighter with the years, shone down upon his rough and devious pathway the white girl-star of Beatrice. His first love was his last. Commentators have endeavoured to explain her away as a metaphysical symbol, and Dante himself came to think of Beatrice as an impersonation of Divine Wisdom. In the close of his long and strenuous life, it might well seem to him that her having lived on earth at all was a dream of his boyhood, so far away that dreaming boyhood of the "Vita Nuova" must have seemed ; but, for all that, we know that it was just a young girl's face that led this strong stern man of iron and tears safely through his pilgrimage of the world.

"All ye that pass along Love's trodden way
Pause ye awhile,"

and meditate upon this marvel.

II

AUCASSIN AND NICOLETE *

THOUGH the song-story—"cante-fable"—
"C'est d'Aucassin et de Nicolete," has long
had an antiquarian interest for scholars,
it is only during the last twenty years or so that it
has taken its place in the living literature of the
world, and given two of the most fragrant names
to the mythology of lovers. Monsieur Bida in
France, and Mr. Andrew Lang and Mr. F. W.
Bourdillon in England, are to be thanked for
rescuing this precious pearl from the dust-heaps
of philological learning. In England Mr. Bour-
dillon was first with a very graceful and scholarly
translation. Walter Pater in his famous essays
on "The Renaissance" early directed to it the
attention of amateurs of such literary delicacies;
but practically Mr. Lang is its sponsor in English,
by virtue of a translation which for freshness and
grace and tender beauty may well take the place

* Though Aucassin and Nicolete are not historically authenticated lovers, being the children of a troubadour's imagination, I have ventured to include their story, because they have long since been real to us—through romance.

ABELARD AND HÉLOÏSE

and turned a philosopher into a troubadour, was for ever dried up; and though, indeed, he was soon to wither to an asceticism which regarded his love for Héloïse as a sinful lust of the flesh, yet his head retained enough of its vital originality to keep him still and always a pioneer of honest thinking, and, therefore, a rebel in the eyes of the Church. To-day Abélard's heresies have become a part of official Christian doctrines, as is the way with any heresies whatsoever; but several centuries have gone by in the interval, and the way of the honest thinker is easier to-day—if he is careful to choose his subjects! Though Abélard grew more and more of an ascetic moralist, he does not appear to have lost his courage as a masculine thinker, and, as long as he lived, he was ever ready to take the perilous chances of truth. This, necessarily, made his life eventful, and even stormy, for the next few years, and finally drove him into a sort of exile, resulting in the foundation of that lonely little monastery, in the valley of Arduzon, the name of which, the Paraclete, is so consecrated to romance. Once more the old miracle of his silver speech took place. Distant and almost uninhabitable as was the valley where, with a brother or two, he had taken up his exile, though, as he tells us, you had to build your rough cabin for yourself, and had to be content with moss and mud to lie on, and the grassy bank to eat from, still the pilgrim audience somehow found its way, as inevitably the sleuth-hounds of heresy found theirs

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

also. For there is no spot on the earth, however lonely, where it is absolutely safe to tell the truth. It was that popular and industrious St. Bernard of Clairvaux that this time made things uncomfortable for Abélard; and with that usual luck of his, which seemed to make every change in his life for the worse, Abélard accepted an invitation to preside over the Abbey of St. Gildas at Rhuy in Brittany. The Abbey of St. Gildas was rich and worldly, and it is more than likely that the good monks had been attracted to Abélard rather by the heterodoxy of his reputation than by his piety. Their disappointment was to be keen and bitter, for how different was this austere, atrophied Abélard from the gay monk of the world they had looked forward to see. Nor were they long in expressing their disappointment. Soon they were violently to oppose his authority and even to drop poison into his food.

Abélard had been abbot of St. Gildas but three or four years when news came to him that Héloïse was in trouble too. The nuns of Argenteuil, of which monastery she had been prioress, had been turned out of their home, owing more to the ecclesiastical avarice of the Abbot Suger of St. Denis—who fished up an old document to prove that Argenteuil really belonged to the monastery of St. Denis—than to the probably exaggerated accounts of the worldliness of the nuns. On hearing this news, Abélard transferred the

ABÉLARD AND HÉLOÏSE

Paraclete, still his property, into Héloïse's keeping, and, within a year or two, the nunnery thus founded became one of the most famous in the kingdom, respected, and, as we would say, fashionable. The goodness and high-mindedness of Héloïse are as apparent in her success as is her charm. Nobles and prelates smiled gifts upon her little abbey, and noble ladies anxious to take the veil thought first of the Paraclete. Well might a world-weary, perhaps love-thwarted, girl seek out such a spiritual mother; for, good and pure and spiritual as Héloïse was, her letters tell us that the spring of an undying love still kept her nature sweet and sympathetic to the human needs.

A young monk seeking Abélard would indeed have made no such happy choice of spiritual director. Ask the monks of St. Gildas! These perhaps over-human fathers seem at length to have so violently resisted Abélard's stern purpose to reform them, as to have driven him from the Abbey in very fear for his life; though it must not be forgotten that in the midst of all these various "calamities," of which presently he was so feelingly to write, Abélard still remained Abbot of St. Gildas, and enjoyed an abbot's revenue. The monks, however, found it possible still to make his life a burden, and his calumniators were not slow to take their side against him. One day, sick at heart, and apparently anxious to tell his own truth about himself, Abélard sat down and

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

wrote to an unknown friend "The Story of my Calamities," a document of the first importance to our understanding of his nature, but more important still, because, accidentally being read by Héloïse in her quiet nunnery, it prompted her to write the first of her beautiful heartfelt letters: "To her lord, yea, father; to her spouse, yea, brother; from his servant, yea, daughter—his wife, his sister; to Abélard from Héloïse." His spiritual daughters, the good sisters of the Paraclete—"they who have given themselves to God in the person of her who has given herself exclusively to thee"—were alarmed to hear such news of him, and begged that he would write to ease their anxious hearts. "A letter would cost thee so little," cried Héloïse reproachfully, and quotes Seneca on the epistolary duties of friends.

In the interval between Abélard's making over the Paraclete to Héloïse, and the writing of "The Story of my Calamities," he had paid many visits to her abbey, very strictly in the character of her spiritual patron and director. The tongues of the world wagged over these visits, but we have only to read Abélard's "dusty answers" to Héloïse's letters to realize that the world was all too wrong. The Abélard that had taught Héloïse her Greek and Hebrew, and floated love-songs through the lattice to the ears of an eaves-dropping Paris, was dead. He was now a serious doctor of divinity, with a strong leaning towards asceticism. The old warm-blooded,

ABÉLARD AND HÉLOÏSE

angel-eyed dream that Héloïse could still write of with stirring bosom, after so many years, and still regard—for all her ecclesiastical dignity—as the crown of her woman's life, was for poor Abélard a folly and a foulness. To her burning words he answered with dry counsels of perfection—in letters which, from the human point of view, are the most pitiful things in literature.

But, on the other hand, where in literature has a woman so daringly laid bare her heart with so splendid and so pure a shamelessness! When we consider, too, the time in which she lived, all the disabilities under which a woman eager to “utter all herself upon the air” must have laboured, the courage of such an emotional sincerity constitutes an achievement before which Abélard's intellectual audacities seem mere college triumphs. Ah, listen how this twelfth century abbess dared to love :

“ . . . All your wishes I have blindly fulfilled, even to the point that, not being able to bring myself to offer you the least resistance, I have had the courage, on a word from you, to lose myself. I have done still more : ah!—strange indeed—my love has turned to such madness that it has sacrificed, without hope of ever recovering it, that which was the one object of its desire ; at your command, I have, with a new habit, taken another heart, just to show you that you are as much the only master of my heart as of my body. Never, God is my witness, have I

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

ever sought from you anything but just yourself ; it is you only, and not your possessions, that I love. I have never given a thought either to any questions of marriage or marriage dower, or indeed to any joys or wishes of my own. It has been yours alone, as you well know, that I have had at heart. Although the name of wife appears more sacred and more binding, I myself would have liked better the name of mistress, or even—let us say it—that of concubine or courtesan : in the thought that the more I humbled myself for you, the more I should win the right to your good graces, and the less impaired the glorious renown of your genius.

“ You yourself in writing that letter of consolation to a friend have not entirely forgotten these sentiments of mine. You have not disdained to recall some of those reasons for which I did my best to dissuade you from our fatal marriage, but you have passed over in silence almost all those which made me prefer love to marriage, liberty to a chain. I take God to witness that if Augustus, master of the world, had deemed me worthy of the honour of his alliance, and assured me of the Empire of the universe for ever, the name of courtesan with thee would have seemed sweeter and nobler than the name of empress with him ; for it is not riches, not power, that makes greatness : riches and power are things of fortune ; greatness depends upon merit.”

ABÉLARD AND HÉLOÏSE

Abélard has his place in the history of philosophy, but his name would hardly have attained its familiarity on the lips of men, had it not been for his love story, and the real love in the story was that of Héloïse. For such a love the history of love has but few parallels, and what picture could be more dramatically poignant than that with which the story closes. At last, all his battles fought, Abélard came to die, and Héloïse, by connivance of a friendly abbot, contrived that his body should be brought in secret to the Paraclete. The Abbot of Cluny deserves well of romance for that good deed. Héloïse survived Abélard twenty-one years, and much of that time she must have watched over his sleep in that quiet chapel in the lonely valley of Arduzon. Surely no love story in the world has a more touching end than this, an end more picturesque in its pathos. As time passed, that vigil must have grown less and less the vigil of a wife's heartbreak, and more and more the vigil of a mother over the sleep of her tired child. For a woman's love is always a mother's love—most of all, perhaps, the love for her husband.

A pretty story tells that when Héloïse died she was buried in the same tomb as her husband, and that the dead man opened wide his arms to receive her. Certain it seems that the ashes of the two lovers were, at one time or another, mingled, and that Abélard and Héloïse now rest together in Père La Chaise.

IX

ROBERT BROWNING AND ELIZABETH BARRETT

IN addition to its own intrinsic beauty and completeness, its perfection as an achievement in human happiness, the love story of the Brownings brings us the minor, but real, satisfaction of seeing love once again triumphantly demolishing one more platitude of so-called worldly wisdom—the matrimonial incompatibility of artistic temperaments, and, above all, of literary persons. Once again, the wisdom of this world is shown to be foolishness with love. The idea of two poets living together in harmony, and making a shining success of their marriage, has been immemorably regarded as an impossibility in nature. One poet in a household is popularly considered as a sufficient trial of human nerves, but two under the same nuptial roof would seem to be merely a theme for the Comic Muse. Even Wordsworth turns humorist at the thought. “So Robert Browning and Miss Barrett have gone off together,” he said, when the news of their marriage, with which all literary London of 1846 was humming, came to

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

him, "I hope they understand each other—nobody else would." And even an intimate friend and confidant, Mrs. Jameson, has her doubts and fears. "I have here," she wrote from Paris to a friend, "a poet and a poetess—two celebrities who have run away and married under circumstances peculiarly interesting, and such as to render imprudence—the height of prudence. Both excellent; but God help them! for I know not how the two poet heads and poet hearts will get on through this prosaic world."

We need not trouble ourselves further with this general preconception as to the incompatibility of poets, except to say that it seems to be a part of the absurd, widespread notion that two of a trade make bad companions, so that similarity of temperaments and community of tasks are to be avoided rather than sought in marriage. Such is the wild nonsense that passes from lip to lip as proverbial wisdom. Far from being surprised that two poets should make a success of it, one might surmise that the union of two whose very business is with beauty and love and the things of the spirit would be on that very account the more sensitively complete; and that, even in the marriages of those who are not poets, it is the poetic element in them which is their vitality, which, in fact, makes them marriages at all.

But the Brownings were not merely poets—they were such learned poets as well. In spite of the examples of Abélard and Héloïse, of Pericles and

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Aspasia, Greek scholarship and the simple emotions are not popularly supposed to go together, and, at first sight, the loves of learned persons are apt to be associated with "the loves of the triangles." It is not commonly realized that one may be all the more human for being learned, and that love itself, for that very reason, be thus the better furnished with the varied material of mutual sympathy and expression. "Where the heart lies, let the brain lie also." Love is likely to be all the fuller when two can enjoy Æschylus together, and even Greek itself, as the Browning letters most humanly prove to us, may become one of love's playthings. Nor, I presume, can it be a disadvantage for love to be able to declare itself after the manner of "Sonnets from the Portuguese."

Great love-poetry is usually a lonely, one-sided thing. Most often it is the ideal utterance of ideal feelings, feelings directed towards an imaginary, or an unattainable, or an unresponsive object, the voice of unrequited passion; or it is a purely dramatic utterance—such as that of Romeo and Juliet—the ideal converse of ideal beings. So, we say, men and women make love in poetry or in novels; but in real life, love must be satisfied with a more homespun expression. Now herein is the romantic thrill and satisfaction of the loves of the Brownings. Here are two modern Londoners simply and, so to say, prosaically in love, like other ordinary human beings, but whose natural way of

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

telling each other happens to be—great poetry. The unlettered heart must have recourse to ready-made poetry to express its inexpressible—poets are born to this end, to serve as the mouthpieces of lovers—but here we have two lovers who instinctively express themselves in masterpieces, two royal natures making love royally, in the speech of gods, in the language of angels. Here we have great poetry not merely as unrelated expression, for the use of this or that according to his needs, but great poetry springing from the hearts of two great poets as the natural means of communication between them—when we read :

“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways—”
or read :

“God be thanked, the meanest of his creatures
Boasts two soul sides, one to face the world with,
One to show a woman when he loves her !”

We are not only reading great poetry with its universal message and application, we are also reading the actual words which an actual woman and an actual man created and employed for the use of their own private hearts. Not Romeo and Juliet at a moonlit window in Verona, but Elizabeth Barrett, living at 50 Wimpole Street, London, in the year 1845, and Robert Browning, living at New Cross, Hatcham, Surrey, in the same year. Surely the poetry thus gains an added thrill for us, as we realize its first employment by two flesh-and-blood human beings of our own time.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Appropriately, though indeed involuntarily enough, it was a poem of Elizabeth Barrett's own that began the whole beautiful story. In 1844 she had followed up her first success of "The Serapion" volume by the publication of two volumes of "Poems" containing work such as "A Drama of Exile," "The Cry of the Children," "The Rhyme of the Duchess May," "The Lay of the Brown Rosary," "A Vision of Poets," and "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," which had given her an immediate wide popularity. Robert Browning had admired these poems, as Miss Barrett had admired his "Paracelsus," and that series of masterpieces which in 1841 he had published in cheap and actual serial form under the symbolic title of "Bells and Pomegranates"—"Pippa Passes" being included amongst them. A mutual friend of the two poets, John Kenyon, a school-fellow of Browning's father, and a kinsman of Miss Barrett, who afterwards referred to him as her "fairy Godfather," had urged Browning to write to her of his appreciation, an appreciation including, one cannot but surmise, some personal gratification in this verse, which must have pulled him up with a pleased start as he read "Lady Geraldine's Courtship":

"Or at times a modern volume, Wordsworth's solemn-thoughted idyl,
Howitt's ballad-verse, or Tennyson's enchanted reverie—
Or from Browning some 'Pomegranate,' which, if cut deep down the middle,
Shows a heart within blood-tinctured, of a veined humanity."

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

Browning took his friend's advice and on January 11, 1845, mailed this whole-hearted letter :

“ NEW CROSS, HATCHAM, SURREY.

(Post-mark, *January 10, 1845.*)

“ I love your verses with all my heart, dear Miss Barrett—and this is no off-hand complimentary letter that I shall write—whatever else, no prompt matter-of-course recognition of your genius, and there a natural and graceful end of the thing. Since the day last week when I first read your poems, I quite laugh to remember how I have been turning and turning again in my mind what I should be able to tell you of their effect upon me, for in the first flush of delight I thought I would this once get out of my habit of purely passive enjoyment when I do really enjoy, and thoroughly justify my admiration—perhaps even, as a loyal fellow-craftsman should, try and find fault and do you some little good to be proud of hereafter!—but nothing comes of it all—so into me has it gone, and part of me has it become, this great living poetry of yours, not a flower of which but took root and grew—oh, how different that is from lying to be dried and pressed flat, and prized highly, and put in a book with a proper account at top and bottom, and shut up and put away . . . and the book called a ‘Flora’ besides! After all, I need not give up the thought of doing that, too, in time; because even now, talking with whoever is worthy, I can give a reason for my faith in one and another excellence, the fresh strange music, the affluent language, the exquisite pathos, and true new brave thought; but

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

in thus addressing myself to you—your own self, and for the first time, my feeling rises altogether. I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too. Do you know I was once not very far from seeing—really seeing you? Mr. Kenyon said to me one morning, ‘Would you like to see Miss Barrett?’ Then he went to announce me—then he returned . . . you were too unwell, and now it is years ago, and I feel as at some untoward passage in my travels, as if I had been close, so close, to some world’s wonder in chapel or crypt, only a screen to push and I might have entered, but there was some slight, so it now seems, slight and just sufficient bar to admission, and the half-opened door shut, and I went home my thousands of miles, and the sight was never to be?

“Well, these Poems were to be, and this true thankful joy and pride with which I feel myself,

“Yours ever faithfully,

MISS BARRETT,

“ROBERT BROWNING.

50 Wimpole St.

R. BROWNING.”

Miss Barrett answered this letter, by return mail, but, before we quote her answer, we are able to take a glimpse behind the scenes at the delightfully girlish excitement and heart-flutter which it brought into her invalid solitude. “I had a letter,” we find her writing to her close friend, Mr. Martin, “from Browning the poet last night, which threw me into ecstasies—Browning, the author of ‘Paracelsus,’ and king of the mystics.” And to her friend Miss

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

Mitford she had even confided the clause "and I love you too," as she confesses to Browning, a year and a half after, when they had long been affianced to each other, and could look back, after the manner of lovers, with a tender retrospective curiosity at love's beginning, before it knew itself for love. Browning had written: "Do you remember that the first word I ever wrote to you was, 'I love you, dear Miss Barrett' ? It was so—could not but be so—and I always loved you, as I shall always." "Do I remember ? Yes, indeed, I remember," was the answer. "How I recurred and wondered afterwards, though at the moment it seemed very simple and what was to be met within our philosophy every day. But there, you see, there's the danger of using *mala verba* ! The Fates catch them up and knit them into the web !" Then she goes on to tell of that early "imprudence." "I was writing to Miss Mitford and of you," she says, "we differed about you often . . . because she did not appreciate you properly, and was fond of dwelling on the 'obscurity' when I talked of the light—and I, just then writing of you, added in my headlong, unreflecting way that I had had a real letter from you which said that you loved me—— 'Oh—but,' I wrote on, 'you are not to mistake this, not to repeat it—for, of course, it is simply the 'purest of philanthropies' . . . some words to that effect—and if yours was the purest of philanthropies, mine was the purest of innocences, as you may well

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

believe . . . for if I had had the shadow of a foresight, I should not have fallen into the snare. So vexed I was afterwards! Not that she thought anything at the time, or has referred to it since, or remembers a word now. Only I was vexed in my innermost heart . . . and *am* . . . do you know? . . . that I should have spoken lightly of such an expression of yours—though you meant it lightly too, dearest! It was a disguised angel, and I should have known it by its wings though they did not fly.”

So she could write out of the fullness of knowledge in June, 1846, and thus we are able to read the letter which she sent on January 11, 1845, smiling to ourselves in knowing what “Mr. Browning” naturally could not know and how much more feeling went with it than either was conscious of. “I thank you, dear Mr. Browning,” the letter begins, “from the bottom of my heart. You meant to give me pleasure by your letter—and even if the object had not been answered, I ought still to thank you. But it is thoroughly answered. Such a letter from such a hand! sympathy is dear—very dear to me: but the sympathy of a poet, and of such a poet, is the quintessence of sympathy to me! . . . For the rest you draw me on with your kindness. It is difficult to get rid of people when you once have given them too much pleasure—*that* is a fact, and we will not stop for the moral of it. What I was going to say—after a little natural hesitation—

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

is, that if ever you emerge without inconvenient effort from your 'passive state,' and will *tell* me of such faults as rise to the surface and strike you as important in my poems . . . you will confer a lasting obligation on me, and one which I shall value so much, that I covet it at a distance. I do not pretend to any extraordinary meekness under criticism and it is possible enough that I might not be altogether obedient to yours."

More of this, and then, with the womanly playfulness which is the charm of all her letters, she takes teasing advantage of that perhaps not over fortunate image of "the crypt."

"Is it indeed true that I was so near to the pleasure and honour of making your acquaintance? And can it be true that you look back upon the lost opportunity with any regret? *But*—you know—if you had entered the 'crypt,' you might have caught cold, or been tired to death, and *wished* yourself 'a thousand miles off'; which would have been worse than travelling then. It is not my interest, however, to put each thought in your head about its being 'all for the best'; and I could rather hope (as I do) that what I lost by one chance I may recover by some future one. Winter shuts me up as they do dormouse's eyes; in the spring, *we shall see*; and I am so much better that I seem to be turning round to the outward world again. And in the meantime I have learnt to know your voice, not merely from the poetry, but from the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

kindness in it. Mr. Kenyon often speaks of you—dear Mr. Kenyon!—I am writing too much—and notwithstanding that I am writing too much, I will write of one thing more. I will say that I am your debtor, not only for this cordial letter and for all the pleasure which came with it, but in other ways, and those the highest; and I will say that while I love to follow this divine art of poetry, in proportion to my love for it and my devotion to it, I must be a devout admirer and student of your works. This is in my heart to say to you—and I say it.

“And, for the rest, I am proud to remain,

“Yours obliged and faithful,

“ELIZABETH B. BARRETT.”

So began a correspondence which was thenceforth carried on copiously, even voluminously, and with increasing intimacy, hardly a day missed, for nearly two years, till the day came which made letters no longer necessary, that September 12, 1846, on which the two correspondents became husband and wife in Marylebone Church, a gloomy sanctuary thus transformed into a shrine to which in after-years Robert Browning was frequently a votive pilgrim. But this happy consummation had not come about without much travail and searching of heart, and Elizabeth Barrett at least had little foreseen such outcome of even so ardent a literary friendship. She was thirty-eight years old, Browning

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

thirty-two, when they had begun writing to each other, and, as the result of an accident to her spine in early womanhood, she had been compelled to lead the life of a recluse, seldom venturing out of doors, seeing few beyond her immediate family, and keeping up her eager friendship chiefly by correspondence. Her permanent invalidism had become all too much of an institution in the Browning household, and was especially so regarded by her father, a type of parent hard to conceive of nowadays, and particularly in relation to such a daughter—a man who combined domestic despotism with a charnel-house piety, autocratically regarding his children, particularly his hushed and cloistered daughters—of whom there were two, besides Elizabeth, both devoted to her—as the unquestioning ministrants of his gloomy will and pleasure. For them to have any wishes that ran counter to his was regarded as unfilial selfishness, and nothing less than a complete subordination of their lives to his grim routine satisfied his monomaniac ideal of filial duty. Of this the marriage of any one of them was proved in two instances to be a sternly unforgivable transgression.

The man was one of those unconscious moral monsters which a narrow Puritanism, and the “business habits” of middle-class commercialism, occasionally breed, and in his case the autocracy encouraged by his administration in his earlier manhood of West

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Indian plantations, from which he inherited considerable wealth, constituted to complete him as a dull and stupid tyrant, in whom egotism had finally culminated in the cruelty of mental disease. It is painful to think of the existence of such people at all, but that a nature so sensitive, so eagerly affectionate, as Elizabeth Barrett's should have been subject to so preposterous a despotism makes one dreary to recall and impotently furious to realize that the shade of Edward Moulton Barrett is long since out of the reach of appropriate castigation; as it is impossible with patience to read of the gentle submissiveness and a tender-conscienced solicitude with which his great-hearted daughter respected his strange feelings, till the moment when she at last became sorrowfully aware that what she had mistaken for parental love was merely a lunatic form of parental selfishness.

It says no little for her mental vigour that she was able to maintain her soul alive at all in such an atmosphere, not to speak of projecting it in a poetic creativeness so abounding; for her sofa was so evidently regarded in the household as little short of a mattress-grave over which her lugubrious parent was accustomed unctuously to pray with her each evening. The light was hardly allowed to enter her room, and it was a plain tempting of Providence for her to walk across the floor. Thoroughly, indeed, must she have learned that

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

lesson of spiritual detachment which she so finely expresses in "Aurora Leigh":

"I was not, therefore, sad ;
My soul was singing at a work apart
Behind the wall of sense, as safe from harm
As sings the lark when sucked up out of sight
In vortices of glory and blue air."

Yet, with everyone about her—including a conspiracy of family physicians—so complacently convinced of and even resigned to her moribund destiny, what wonder if her naturally buoyant spirit grew shadowed by her surroundings, and that dark images of cypresses and poppies and "the funeral shears" should come readily to her pen when her lover, blowing his Roland's horn beneath the walls of her dark tower, would summon her out into the sunshine and the future :

"Look up and see the casement broken in,
The bats and owlets builders in the roof!
My cricket chirps against thy mandolin.
Hush, call no echo up in further proof
Of desolation! There's a voice within
That weeps . . . as thou must sing . . . alone, aloof."

"In the spring—we shall see." It seems a simple thing that Browning should follow up his letter by calling on a correspondent who had thus immediately and open-handedly accepted him for a friend ; but such a proceeding was no slight matter with the Barrett household, and it is not difficult to understand that it might take on the aspect of a somewhat

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

seriously exciting adventure to an imaginative woman, made unnaturally sensitive to contact with the outer world by her exotic seclusion. "And as to seeing you besides," she writes two months after their first letter, "I observe that you distrust me, and that perhaps you penetrate my morbidity and guess how when the moment comes to see a living human face to which I am not accustomed I shrink and grow pale in the spirit. Do you? . . . if you think that I shall not like to see you, you are wrong, for all your learning. But I shall be afraid of you at first—though I am not in writing thus. You are Paracelsus, and I am a recluse with nerves that have been all broken on the rack, and now hang loosely—quivering at a step and breath." Again and again she pleads for delay, urging, "this east wind that seems to blow through the sun and moon." To which Browning answers, with a protecting ring already in his voice, "if my truest heart's wishes avail, you shall laugh at east winds yet as I do"; and again, with something of an approach to a lover's fancifulness, "I am sure I never knew till now whether the East or West or South were the quarter to pray for—But surely the weather was a little better last week, and you, were you not better? And do you know—but it's all self-flattery I believe—still I cannot help fancying the East wind does my head harm too!" And yet again playfully pleading, growing bolder from letter to letter: "Surely the wind that sets my chestnut

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

tree dancing, all its baby-cone-blossoms, green now, rocking like fairy castles on a hill in an earthquake—that is South-west, surely ! ” But how charming is the tender tact with which he submissively waits her pleasure, and at what courtly pains he is to make her feel his reverent regard for the spirit as well as the letter of her wish. In mid-April he writes, “ yesterday I had occasion to go your way—past, that is, Wimpole Street, the end of it—and, do you know, I did not seem to have leave from you to go down it yet, much less count number after number till I came to yours—much least than less, look up when I did come there.”

Surely in such passages as these we feel that the sky is growing rosy with danger hints of dawn. Already she, on her side, had, woman-like, taken to lecturing him on taking proper care of himself : “ So when wise people happen to be ill, they sit up till six o’clock in the morning and get up again at nine ? ” and he in return had promised to be good, and so “ the day,” when, as he wrote, “ I shall see you with my own, own eyes,” naturally grew in significance for both the longer it was put off. To the last she protests, and, in finally giving in, pathetically warns him—“ There is nothing to see in me ; nor to hear in me—I never learnt to talk as you do in London ; although I can admire that brightness of carved speech in Mr. Kenyon and others. If my poetry is worth anything to my eye, it is the flower of me.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

I have lived most and been most happy in it, and so it has all my colours ; the rest of me is nothing but a root, fit for the ground and the dark. . . . Not that I am not touched by your caring so at all ! I am deeply touched now ; and presently . . . I shall understand. Come then. There will be truth and simplicity, for you in any case ; and a friend." So the momentous day is fixed and on Tuesday, May 20, 1845, the two poets did at last meet.

One is accustomed to think of Browning by the portraits of him in his later years, leonine and magisterial, but it is necessary to picture him on this occasion as " slim and dark and very handsome—just a trifle of a dandy." It is easy to realize that in early manhood his would be a personality victoriously vital and magnetic, radiating joyous strength, tempered with courtly gentleness, in that hushed, expectant, rather frightened room in Wimpole Street. And the charm of the little, frail, silk-clad figure that awaited " Paracelsus " is easy to recapture from the well-known portrait, shadowed it seems to me as it is with sickness, but with such a warmth and depth of concentrated life in the strange, great eyes looking out almost startingly from a cave of lustrous hair. One is naturally left to one's own fancies to fill in that fateful afternoon, but, on returning home, Browning wrote a note full of a charming, boyish solicitude as to the impression he had made : " I trust to you

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

for a true account of how you are—if tired, if not tired, if I did wrong in any thing—or, if you please, right in any thing.” Was his voice too loud? His own people said it was apt to be! “And did I stay too long?”

To which comes reassuring answer; but evidently Browning’s good behaviour was of short duration, for two days after he seems to have written a letter, full of “wild speaking,” which she can only return and beg him to destroy, warning him never to refer to it again, on pain of their ceasing to see each other. “Now, if there should be one word of answer attempted to this; or of reference; I must not . . . I will not see you again—and you will justify me later in your heart.” Browning was duly submissive, destroyed the letter, and was allowed to call again—continues to do so from then on, once, sometimes twice, a week, and the correspondence, hardly a day missed, goes on, growing insensibly in intimacy—for all its learned interests, playful squabbles over Dante and so forth—till the suppressed fire at length breaks forth again, to be deprecated once more, but with a fashion of appeal that rather encourages than stays it, rouses, that is, an ever deeper tenderness in Browning’s heart. Indeed, nothing could be more gentle, more exquisitely considerate than the manner in which Browning keeps himself in hand, allowing the silent pressure of his unspoken love insensibly to unfold and sustain her, with the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

delicate patience that only profound feeling is master of. And, long before there is outspoken mention of love, the words have the accent of love on both sides. "Ever your own R. B." "Not a word, even under the little blue flowers!!! E. B. B." One thinks of :

"Beloved, thou hast brought me many flowers
Plucked in the garden, all the summer through."

And we know now that while, with such passionate renunciation, she was pushing this masterful gentle love away from her, as a feeling she had no right to accept or indulge, that all the time, unknown to her lover, her heart was crying out to itself in secret sonnets one day to be known as "Sonnets from the Portuguese." It is a fascinating study of two noble natures in travail to read these sonnets, and the poems that belong to them—such as "A Denial" and "Insufficiency"—side by side with these letters which to the condensed, star-like utterance of the poetry are as the raw material of the stellar turmoil, the nebular process, from which at last a new world was to emerge with steady shining. To take perhaps the most famous of the sonnets :

"If thou must love me, let it be for nought
Except for love's sake only . . .
Neither love me for
Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry. . . ."

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

How even more real still the poetry seems to be made by annotating it with such passages as these from Miss Barrett's letters: "Shall I tell you besides?—The first moment in which I seemed to admit to myself in a flash of lightning the possibility of your affection for me being more than dream-work . . . the first moment was that when you intimated (as you have done since repeatedly) that you cared for me not for a reason, but because you cared for me. . . . And when unreasonable-ness stands for a reason, it is a promising state of things, we may both admit." And again, "I have sometimes felt jealous of myself . . . of my own infirmities . . . and thought that you cared for me only because your chivalry touched them with a silver sound." To which Browning: "You see, you thought, if but for a moment, I loved your intellect—or what predominates in your poetry and is most distinct from your heart—better, or as well as you—did you not? And I have told you everything—explained everything . . . have I not? And now I will dare . . . yes, dearest, kiss you back to my heart again, my own. There—and there!"

It is the author of "Sordello" writing so, and the delight and surprise of this correspondence is in its rather unexpected everyday humanity—unless ye be as these little ones! And these learned lovers can be as childish, as boy-and-girlish, as the most unlettered lovers that ever wrote baby-talk. They can be just as happy and silly as if they never knew a

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

word of Greek. "Dearest, dearestest!" writes the author of "Aurora Leigh," signing herself, as she came to do, by her child's pet name, "Ba"—

"Yes, call me by my pet-name! let me hear
The name I used to run at when a child."

"Ba" is a contraction for "Baby," and in one letter we find the abstruse poet of Aristophanes' Apology writing it playfully in Greek letters! Such toys are all the more appealing from their springing, like children's flowers amid the rocks, out of pages of true Browningsque obscurity, prose marvellously contorted and dark as a thicket, which even the by no means pellucid Miss Barrett has occasionally to give up. "People say of you and of me, dear Mr. Browning, that we love the darkness and use a sphinxine idiom in our talk; and really you do talk a little like a sphinx in your argument drawn from 'Vivian Grey,'" and poor Browning sometimes anticipates for some of his dark sayings that they are "pretty sure to meet the usual fortune of my writings—you will ask what it means!"

Certainly, one sometimes recalls Wordsworth's gibe, and hopes "that they understand each other"; for their almost painful solicitude that, lover-like, each should by no means miss the exact shade and refinement of their feelings and even words sometimes produces passages of agonized qualification worthy of George Meredith or Mr. Henry James. But, after all, their case was one that needed delicate

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

and subtle presentation, for, under the circumstances, their love could not be an affair of plain sailing. With Miss Barrett's health as it was, and still more as it was superstitiously supposed to be, love had, or seemed to have, exceptional need of anxious self-justification. Perplexity, however, was to be resolved and conclusion at length precipitated by circumstances the least promising. Fortunately, in this, as in other love stories, the tyrant was to have his uses. Early in the autumn of 1845, the family doctors had urged that Miss Barrett should spend the winter in Italy. So she would escape her annual winter relapse, and probably find permanent benefit. The trip was easy to arrange. Her brothers were ready to accompany her, and all her friends seconded the physicians in urging the experiment. But here the true nature of the egregious Mr. Barrett's parental affection declared itself. After sullenly, week after week, refusing to say yea or nay on the subject, thus keeping his daughter on the rack of suspense, he implacably refused his permission. Doctors and friends in vain expostulated, and the courtly Mr. Kenyon spoke his mind in an unwonted outburst. To no avail. Mr. Barrett continued foolishly adamant.

Then at last his daughter's eyes are opened and the exasperating patience of her love for him gives way—"the bitterest 'fact' of all is, that I had believed Papa to have loved me more than he obviously does : but I never

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

regret knowledge"—and at last she opens her arms to that other love, the noble truth of which admits no further denial. In the same letter in which she tells of her father's decision she writes : " In the meantime your letter comes—and if I could seem to be very unhappy after reading it . . . why it would be 'all pretence' on my part, believe me. Can you care for me so much . . . you ? Then that is light enough to account for all the shadows, and to make them almost unregarded—the shadows of the life behind." Already, some days before, she had written, " You have touched me more profoundly than I thought even you could have touched me—my heart was full when you came here to-day. Henceforward I am yours for anything but to do you harm—and I am yours too much, in my heart, ever to consent to do you harm in that way. If I could consent to do it, not only should I be less loyal . . . but in one sense, less yours." She meant, as her reluctance had meant all along, that she felt it wrong to Browning to bring a sick wife to his arms. " Your life ! " she had said over and over again, " if you gave it to me and I put my whole heart into it, what should I put but anxiety, and more sadness than you were born to ? What could I give you, which it would not be ungenerous to give ? "

" We have met late—it is too late to meet,

O friend, not more than friend !

Death's forecome shroud is tangled round my feet,

And if I step or stir, I touch the end.

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

In this last jeopardy
Can I approach thee, I, who cannot move?
How shall I answer thy request for love?
Look in my face and see."

To which Browning had but the one unwavering answer: "Let me say now—this once only—that I loved you from my soul, and gave you my life so much of it as you would take—and all that is done, not to be altered now: it was, in the nature of the proceeding, wholly independent of any return on your part," and again, "it is not since yesterday, nor ten nor twenty years before, that I began to look into my own life, and study its end, and requirements, what would turn to its good or its loss—and I know, if one may know anything, that to make that life yours, and increase it by union with yours, would render me supremely happy, as I said, and say, and feel. My whole suit to you is, in that sense, selfish."

Mr. Barrett's veto on the Italian trip, however, provoked a crisis of feeling sufficiently decisive for his daughter to give Browning her promise that, if the coming winter should prove favourable to her health, she would consent to their engagement. The winter was fortunately a mild one, and when the momentous spring at length arrived she had so far improved that, when Browning claimed her promise, she, still a little fearfully, but without any further reservation, laid her hand in his: "It is your hand, while you hold it: while you choose to

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

hold it, and while it is a living hand." "Do you know what you are to me . . . you?" she continues. "We talk of the mild weather doing me good . . . of the sun doing me good . . . of going into the air as a means of good! Have you done me no good, do you fancy, in loving me and lifting me up? Has the unaccustomed divine love and tenderness been nothing to me? Think! Mrs. Jameson says earnestly . . . said to me the other day . . . that 'love was only magnetism.' And I say in my heart, that, magnet or no magnet, I have been drawn back into life by your means and for you . . . that I see the dancing mystical lights which are seen through the eyelids . . . and I think of you with an unspeakable gratitude always—always! No other could have done this for me—it was not possible, except by you." Of course, this was the simple, one might say, the scientific, truth of the matter. In after years, no doubt, even the family physicians would have agreed that it was love that had saved, as it was to prolong so fruitfully, their patient's life.

"I find thee; I am safe, and strong, and glad,
As one who stands in dewless asphodel
Looks backward on the tedious time he had
In the upper life—so I, with bosom-swell,
Make witness, here, between the good and bad,
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well." 8

It was on May 6, 1846, that Miss Barrett finally answered yes to life and love, and henceforth we have no more talk of cypresses and poppies, but the

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

letters, from now on, are gay with a sense of nest building, talkative of plans and ways and means. Here Browning's character comes out in its most attractive manliness and simplicity.

He is much exercised as to methods of increasing his income, though she is ever wifely reassuring that, with their joint resources, they will be comfortably enough off, and will not hear of his doing violence to his genius by any activities likely to distract it. The friendly discussions of this question give rise to one utterance on Browning's part which, when one considers his intellectual greatness and distinction, is really touching, almost pathetic, in its child-hearted humility: "I feel sure," he writes, "that whenever I make up my mind to that, I can be rich enough and to spare—because along with what you have thought genius in me is certainly talent, what the world recognizes as such; and I have tried it in various ways, just to be sure that I was a little magnanimous in never intending to use it. Thus, in more than one of the reviews and newspapers that laughed my 'Paracelsus' to scorn ten years ago—in the same column, often, of these reviews, would follow a most laudatory notice of an elementary French book, on a new plan, which I 'did' for my old French Master, and he published—'that was really an useful work'!"

Surely, "greater love than this . . ."! and could anything be more deliciously naïve than Robert

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Browning humbly priding himself on his success with an Elementary French Grammar !

Miss Barrett's two sisters are now partially let into the secret, but neither they nor any other friend are entirely taken into confidence, not even the fairy Godfather, Mr. Kenyon ; for fear of their being involved in Mr. Barrett's certain displeasure. His consent they do not even consider asking, knowing that it would be asked in vain and that it would provoke a painful scene, which his daughter's frail nerves could not support. Thus, almost farcical as it sounds, a woman of thirty-nine and a man of thirty-three, such a woman and such a man too, are forced to plot an elopement as though they were runaway boy and girl. September is finally decided upon for the great adventure, and, meanwhile, she, somewhat pathetically, tests her strength and courage by venturing out into the open air with her sister—an unheard-of escapade. On the first occasion they drove together to Regent's Park, and, when there, she stepped out of the carriage and stood on the grass a few moments in a dream. It had been so long since she had felt the earth under her feet and the air on her cheek. On another occasion we find the sisters going to service to Paddington Chapel, possibly to accustom the timid recluse to the feeling of a church. " Now, that is over," she writes, " and the next time I shall care less." As the day approaches, we have little human touches as to " the ring " and the marriage licence,

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

their wedding-cards and the framing of the announcement of their marriage—which Browning asks her to write for him! They have a good deal of youthful fun over these details. “Wilson,” Miss Barrett’s devoted maid, must, by no means, miss her “place in the story,” for she it was that on the morning of Saturday, September 12, 1846, accompanied her mistress, as they slipped out of the Wimpole Street house together, and hailed a fly to drive them to Marylebone Church—stopping on the way at a chemist’s to steady their nerves with a dose of *sal volatile*. At a quarter past eleven, Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett were man and wife.

After the ceremony, as agreed upon between them, Mrs. Browning returned to her own home, and at one o’clock Browning too was at home again and writing: “I look back, and in every one point, every word and gesture, every letter, every silence—you have been entirely perfect to me—I would not change one word, one look. . . . Take every care of my life which is in that dearest little hand; try and be composed, my beloved. Remember to thank Wilson for me.” Mrs. Browning remained a few days longer under her father’s roof, during which interval it was Browning’s characteristic punctilio not to call upon her, because he could not ask for her by her proper name; but on Saturday, September 19, once more accompanied by the faithful Wilson and her beloved dog “Flush,”

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

who was discreet enough not to bark as his fellow-fugitives stole away, she left Wimpole Street for ever, and, joining her husband, the two poets, henceforward to be named by the one illustrious name, caught the nine o'clock packet from Southampton and, to her delighted surprise, joined their friend Mrs. Jameson in Paris. After a brief rest there, the three friends journeyed on to Italy, a land to be immortally associated with their love-story, henceforth to be their home, and to be loved by them with a passionate adopted patriotism—thus adding their names and fames to those other illustrious poets who have counted England well lost in that they found Italy. At Avignon they took advantage of a brief halt in their journey to make a pious pilgrimage to Vaucluse, in memory of Petrarch and Laura, and “there,” as has been prettily described by Mrs. Browning’s niece, Mrs. Macpherson, in her “Memoirs,” “at the very source of the ‘*chiare, fresche, e dolci acque*,’ Mr. Browning took his wife up in his arms, and carrying her across the shallow, curling water, seated her on a rock that rose throne-like in the middle of the stream.”

Browning must have felt elated indeed and justified of the responsibility for that loved life which he had undertaken, not without grave self-examination, to watch the immediate rejuvenescence wrought in his wife by their divine adventure. “Mrs. Jameson,” she writes to her friend Miss Mitford, “says she, ‘she won’t call me improved, but trans-

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

formed rather '"; and her letters to all her friends at this time are radiant with the high spirits of a new life which must have seemed to her nothing short of a veritable resurrection. Persephone, back again from one of her annual seclusions in Hades, cannot have rejoiced more in the recovered sense of sun and blowing grass and all the good green world. Their destination had been Pisa, and here they are to settle for six months, in rooms close to the Duomo and the Leaning Tower. In the same letter to Miss Mitford is this gay picture of poetic house-keeping after two months of marriage : " Our housekeeping may end perhaps in being a proverb among the nations, for at the beginning it makes Mrs. Jameson laugh heartily. It disappoints her theories, she admits—finding that, albeit poets, we abstain from burning candles at both ends at once, just as if we did statistics and historical abstracts by nature instead. And do not think that the trouble falls on me. Even the pouring out of the coffee is a divided labour, and the ordering of the dinner is quite out of my hands. As for me, when I am so good as to let myself be carried upstairs, and so angelical as to sit still on the sofa, and so considerate, moreover, as not to put my foot into a puddle, why my duty is considered done to a perfection which is worthy of all adoration ; it really is not very hard work to please this task-master."

It was during this stay at Pisa that Mrs. Browning

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

plucked up courage to reveal to her husband, with a shrinking reluctance which witnesses the sensitive sacredness with which she regarded her love for him, certain sonnets which during the months of their courtship she had written in secret, hardly meaning that even his eyes should ever see them. Mr. Gosse has told the pretty story so well from Browning's own account, that I shall quote his words: "Their custom was, Mr. Browning said, to write alone, and not to show each other what they had written. This was a rule which he sometimes broke through, but she never. He had the habit of working in a downstairs room, where their meals were spread, while Mrs. Browning studied in a room on the floor above. One day, early in 1847, their breakfast being over, Mrs. Browning went upstairs, while her husband stood at a window watching the street till the table should be cleared. He was presently aware of some one behind him, although the servant was gone. It was Mrs. Browning, who held him by the shoulder to prevent his turning to look at her, and at the same time pushed a packet of papers into the pocket of his coat. She told him to read that, and to tear it up if he did not like it; and then she fled again to her own room."

Need one say that the "packet of papers" was the "Sonnets from the Portuguese"? One can imagine Browning's double joy as lover and poet in so divine a gift. Such indeed are the gifts of the gods one to the other. In later years Browning was to

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

bring his "Men and Women" and "The Ring and the Book" as his offerings to her feet, though, to his thinking, no gift of his could equal hers, and it is one of the most attractive of all the attractive features of this perfect union that each of the two poets genuinely regarded the other as the greater. "You are wrong—quite wrong," said Browning on one occasion to an acquaintance who had expressed a preference for his poetry over that of his wife's, "she has genius; I am only a painstaking fellow. Can't you imagine a clever sort of angel who plots and plans, and tries to build up something—he wants to make you see it as he sees it—shows you one point of view, carries you off to another, hammering into your head the thing he wants you to understand? And whilst this bother is going on, God Almighty turns you off a little star—that's the difference between us. The true creative power is hers, not mine."

So on this occasion his enthusiasm masterfully overruled his wife's desire to keep the sonnets to themselves. "I dared not," he said, "reserve to myself the finest sonnets written in any language since Shakespeare's." But, at first, his wife would only consent to a private edition. This their friend, Miss Mitford, undertook for them, and a slender volume entitled "Sonnets, by E. B. B.," with the imprint, "Reading, 1847," and marked, "not for publication," was the first retiring form of what have since become the most popular love-poems

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

in the English language. Not till three years after did they appear under their present title—which was a suggestion of Browning's in preference to his wife's proposal to call them "Sonnets translated from the Bosnian," in allusion to her poem "Catarina to Camoens," one of Browning's own favourites.

So in Pisa began that beautiful life together as it was to continue for fifteen happy years. Love has few histories more inspiring, more entirely satisfying to contemplate than this harmony of two natures, each so richly endowed with spiritual and intellectual gifts, and each, at the same time, so fortunately possessed of gracious human qualities, heart wed with heart, as brain with brain, life shared in completest sympathy on its humblest as on its loftiest level.

If ever there was a marriage made in heaven, it was this one, and certainly Wordsworth might set his mind at rest, for no two people ever more thoroughly "understood" each other than these whom the rest of the world found so humorously incomprehensible.

Mrs. Browning's sense of humour must have counted for no little in this harmony, as it is one of the most attractive qualities of her delightfully natural letters. In these may be read as in a gossipy diary the history of the ensuing years, years lived mostly in their Florentine home, that Casa Guidi immortally associated with their names,

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

with occasional trips to England and Paris, years of an even tenour, work done side by side, a vivid social intercourse with a few warmly regarded friends, the struggle for Italian liberty an ever-present burning interest passionately shared, and Mrs. Browning's preoccupation with spiritualism the only shadow of a shade of difference ever between them.

On March 9, 1849, a son had been born to them, and here again Mrs. Browning was to manifest her versatility by proving that a woman could be at once a great poet and the most human of mothers. Indeed, their intellectual distinction seems to be the last thing these two "great minds" were troubled about. Browning's chief pride seems to have been in his wife's health, and his one ambition to be a good husband, while her one vanity seems to have been in his good looks.

On one occasion he had driven her to despair by capriciously shaving his beard. Here is her delightful womanly outburst in a confidential letter to his sister: "A comfort is that Robert is considered to be looking better than he ever was known to look—and this notwithstanding the greyness of his beard . . . which indeed is, in my own mind, very becoming to him, the argentine touch giving a character of elevation and thought to the whole physiognomy. This greyness was suddenly developed—let me tell you how. He was in a state of bilious irritability on the morning of his arrival in

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Rome, from exposure to the sun or some such cause, and in a fit of suicidal impatience shaved away his whole beard . . . whiskers and all!! I cried when I saw him, I was so horror-struck. I might have gone into hysterics and still been reasonable—for no human being was ever so disfigured by so simple an act. Of course, I said, when I recovered heart and voice, that everything was at an end between him and me if he didn't let it all grow again directly, and (upon the further advice of his looking-glass) he yielded the point—and the beard grew—but it grew white—which was the just punishment of the gods. Our sins leave their traces."

So the years go by, but no lapse of years can tame Mrs. Browning's indomitable youthfulness. "Be sure," we find her writing to a friend in 1853, "that it is highly moral to be young as long as possible. Women who throw up the game early (or even late) and wear dresses 'suitable to their years' (that is, as hideous as possible) are a disgrace to their sex."

Certainly she herself had received from nature the gift of a divine girlishness, and the radiance of a spirit eagerly young to the last seems to have transformed her frail, sensitive form as with an interior light, as its white flame, during these happy, ardent years, was too surely consuming its tenement of clay. That very intensity of her nature, which for so long had seemed to animate and sustain her physical life by purely spiritual energy, was, rather than any

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

physical ill, to wear it out. Probably the death of one of her sisters, and—so vitally were her sympathies engaged in Italy's struggle for freedom—the death of Cavour, were as accountable for her last illness as an attack of bronchitis, the like of which she had come safely through before on more than one occasion. But alas! indeed the allotted span of one of the most beautiful realized dreams in the history of human lives had been reached, and it was still "with a face like a girl's," to use Browning's own words, that she died suddenly in his arms in the night of June 29, 1861. Browning, writing to his friend Miss Haworth, thus memorably describes her end and unlocks his bereaved heart. His wife had made light of her illness, and was entirely without presentiment of its seriousness, and on the last evening they had talked over plans for the coming summer. "I sent the servants away," writes Browning, "and her maid to bed—so little reason for disquietude did there seem. Through the night she slept heavily and brokenly—that was the bad sign—but then she would sit up, take her medicine, say unrepeatable things to me, and sleep again. At four o'clock there were symptoms that alarmed me. I called the maid and sent for the doctor. She smiled as I proposed to bathe her feet. 'Well, you are determined to make an exaggerated case of it!' Then came what my heart will keep till I see her again and longer—the most perfect expression of her love to me within

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

my whole knowledge of her. Always smilingly, happily, and with a face like a girl's—and in a few minutes she died in my arms; her head on my cheek. These incidents so sustain me that I tell them to her beloved ones as their right: there was no lingering, no acute pain, no consciousness of separation, but God took her to Himself as you would lift a sleeping child from a dark, uneasy bed into your arms and the light. . . . Her last word was when I asked 'How do you feel?'—'Beautiful.' You know I have her dearest wishes and interest to attend to at once—her child to care for, educate, establish properly; and my own life to fulfil as properly—all just as she would require were she here. I shall leave Italy altogether for years—go to London for a few days' talk with Arabel—then go to my father and begin to try leisurely what will be best for Peni (his son)—but no more 'house-keeping' for me, even with my family. I shall grow, still, I hope—but my root is taken and remains."

For twenty-eight years Browning was to live on and fulfil himself, growing to that crowning height of his genius, "The Ring and the Book," which seven years later he was to bring to her grave, praying that the ring to which he likens it might—

"Lie outside thine, Lyric Love,
Thy rare gold ring of verse (the poet praised)
Linking our England to his Italy."

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

To this sacred task of fatherhood he brought a devotion only comparable with that of his own father before him, and in the social world of London he became a memorable, distinguished figure, but, as he had written, "my root is taken and remains," and, as has been finely said, "none ever saw Browning upon earth again but only a splendid surface."

How faithfully beneath that "splendid surface" the fire of his love burned on through the years is proved by an explosion of anger which in the very year of his own death, 1889, astonished the literary world with its vehemence. His eye had fallen on an old letter to Edward FitzGerald, which FitzGerald's editor had carelessly included in his "Life and Letters." In this letter FitzGerald, writing confidentially, of course, to one of his friends, had spoken slightly of Mrs. Browning. "Mrs. Browning's death is rather a relief to me, I must say : no more Aurora Leighs, thank God !" were the unlucky words on which Browning's eye had fallen. That such words should cause him intense pain and arouse his fierce indignation is surely not surprising, and the savagely interpretative form these feelings took, while considered indecorous at the time, will, I think, find full justification with any who have realized the fervour and the sacredness of the worship thus casually profaned. At all events, this sonnet "To

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Edward FitzGerald" appeared in "The Athenæum" of July 13, 1889 :

"I chanced upon a new book yesterday ;
I opened it, and, where my finger lay
 'Twixt page and uncut page, these words I read—
Some six or seven at most—and I learned thereby
That you, FitzGerald, whom by ear and eye
 She never knew, 'thanked God my wife was dead.'
Ay, dead ! and were yourself alive, good Fitz,
How to return your thanks would task my wits.
 Kicking you seems the common lot of curs—
While more appropriate greeting lends you grace,
Surely to spit there glorifies your face—
 Spitting from lips once sanctified by hers."

FitzGerald's words had affected him, " with the directness of a sharp physical blow." " I felt as if she had died yesterday," he said to a friend. Five months after (December 12, 1889) he himself lay dead in Venice. The foregoing summer he had expressed the wish that he might be buried " where-ever he might die : if in England, with his mother ; if in France, with his father ; if in Italy, with his wife." This wish, however, could not be fulfilled, as the English cemetery in Florence where Mrs. Browning lies had been closed and might not open its gates even to so illustrious a guest. Venice, thereupon, sought the honour of being his resting-place, but finally England and Westminster Abbey claimed him for their own. That sentiment from which it is hard, and scarcely necessary, to escape would feel better satisfied if we could think of these two great poets and lovers lying side by side

R. BROWNING AND E. BARRETT

either in that Italian soil for which they had so deep an affection, or in their native land to whose bede-roll of great poets they add their laurelled names, but, after all, it is easy to forego the gratification of such earth-born fancies in the case of two who were so essentially children of the spirit, and whom we may more appropriately think of as reunited in that "abode where the eternal are."

X

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

FEW love-stories have suffered so much from the vulgarization of gossip as that of Frederic Chopin and George Sand. A whole literature of anecdote and reminiscence has sprung up like a bewildering thicket about their names, till the comparative simplicity of their relationship has been obscured by a cloud of witnesses, who continually pour confusion on each other, and the essential value of it, whatever it may have been, to the two most concerned, has been all but lost sight of. That for a long period it brought satisfactions of a rare and deep kind to two people, gifted alike with the difficult nature of genius, is the important thing to know about it. External criticism on its irregularity, or any other comment that forgets this central fact, is irrelevant. That it was to good purpose in the lives of Chopin and George Sand seems to be sufficiently proved by its enduring so long; for, had it not been so, having nothing to ensure its continuance but the will and pleasure of the two lovers, it would have come to a

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

speedier end. George Sand's affair with Alfred de Musset had, it will be remembered, burned itself out in a year, and, apart from the distinction of the poet concerned, demands no more serious consideration than the rank and file of George Sand's numerous polygamous fancies. An attachment, however, which, on one side at least, has ten years of faithfulness to its credit is only superficially to be denied the importance of domesticity. It is to be feared that the spiritual life of most legal marriages is exhausted in a much shorter period. And, indeed, the quality of the attachment of Chopin and George Sand is hardly less domestic than its longevity. It hardly belongs to the great passions, or the ideal devotions of the world, but is rather the story of a matrimonial comradeship, the "mothering" element, on George Sand's side, at all events, being perhaps its most conspicuous feature.

George Sand seems to have been more of a nurse and a mother to Chopin than a mistress or a muse, and to have supplied his clinging, protection-seeking nature rather with a sheltering companionship than with any more intense or romantic preoccupation; though, indeed, the feeling seems to have gone deepest with Chopin, if one may judge from his reference to George Sand two days before his death. To his friend Franchomme he said, "She had said to me that I would die in no arms but hers." But the cry was perhaps more that of a sick child, missing the comfort of a familiar presence, than that

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

of a heart-broken lover. Yet, of course, George Sand's conquering magnetism, a magnetism rather masculine than feminine in its power—not unlike Catherine of Russia's, one may surmise—must have had its share in the attachment, particularly at its beginning; as Chopin's somewhat feminine grace and distinction, no doubt, first took George Sand's fancy, his genius and his fame playing no small part—for it must not be forgotten that such attributes always went for much with George Sand, whose emotions were closely bound up with her ambition and her love of conquest. The fact of a man being a genius and famous was sufficient for her to set her conquering-cap at him, and there were few men who could resist her great black eyes and her “strange, soft ways.”

Her first impression upon Chopin, however, had been the reverse of favourable. Various stories are told of their first meeting, but Chopin's biographer, Niecks, places most credit on Liszt's account, who said, “I ought to know best, seeing that I was instrumental in bringing the two together.” George Sand, it appears, having been interested in what she had heard of the Polish musician's personality, interested, too, in his compositions, had asked Liszt to make them acquainted. Chopin, however, had held back, frankly confessing his dislike of literary women. But George Sand had persisted, and finally Liszt had brought her along with others to a little party at Chopin's rooms, on

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

an occasion when Chopin, elated with some new compositions, had expressed the desire to play them to some of his friends. So little like love at first sight was this first meeting that Chopin had written to one friend, "Yesterday I met George Sand. . . . She made a very disagreeable impression upon me"; and to another he had said, "What a repellent woman the Sand is! But is she really a woman? I am inclined to doubt it."

It is not difficult to understand Chopin's first feelings of antipathy, when one remembers his aristocratic super-refinement, on the one hand, and George Sand's somewhat blatant bohemianism on the other, so at variance with Chopin's delicate and somewhat finicky ideal of femininity. George Sand scorned all that feminine finesse he valued, smoked strong cigars, and frequently wore men's clothes. Chopin, the spoiled protégé of aristocracy, was accustomed to exquisite Court ladies, and was a severe critic of their dressmakers. Still, when George Sand had made up her mind to charm, she seldom failed; and whether or not we can find it in her portraits, or divine it from descriptions of her, her magnetism must have been very extraordinary. Heine has described her with great particularity, but at too great length to quote, and with too much whimsicality really to portray. But he calls her "as beautiful as the Venus of Milo"—whom she hardly seems to suggest—and allows her almost every gift and grace except wit in conversation,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

in which she seems to have been oddly lacking. "George Sand never says anything witty; she is indeed one of the most unwitty Frenchwomen I know." The charm was evidently, then, not in her conversation. But beautiful, of a dark masculine—say, rather boyish—type she certainly seems to have been. Liszt seems to suggest her better than any one, and to suggest, too, the secret of the power she was soon to gain over the sensitive, feminine Chopin.

"Dark and olive-complexioned Lélia," he writes, "thou hast walked in solitary places, sombre as Lara, distracted as Manfred, rebellious as Cain, but more fierce, more pitiless, more inconsolable than they, because thou hast found among the hearts of men none feminine enough to love thee as they have been loved, to pay to thy virile charms the tribute of a confiding and blind submission, of a silent and ardent devotion, to suffer his allegiance to be protected by thy Amazonian strength!"

With this impression of George Sand, we may contrast Niecks's description of Chopin: "A slim frame of middle height; fragile but wonderfully flexible limbs; delicately formed hands; very small feet; an oval, softly outlined head; a pale, transparent complexion; long silken hair of a light chestnut colour, parted on one side; tender brown eyes, intelligent rather than dreamy; a finely curved aquiline nose; a sweet, subtle smile; graceful and varied gestures: such was the outward presence of Chopin." "*Couleur de bière*" is one

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

curiously unpoetic description of his eyes—though, aside from its associations, it must be remembered that beer is a beautifully coloured liquid. Liszt again adds an evocative touch or two: “The *timbre* of his voice was subdued and often muffled; and his movements had such a distinction, and his manners such an impress of good society that one treated him unconsciously like a prince. His whole appearance made one think of that of the *convolvuli*, which on incredibly slender stems balance divinely coloured chalices of such vaporous tissue that the slightest touch destroys them.”

The first meeting of these two strongly contrasted beings was in the early part of 1837—Chopin being at that time twenty-eight and George Sand five years his senior—and, whatever had been Chopin’s first antipathy, it is evident that it was of no long duration, for by the summer of the same year we find him one of her guests down at Nohant, George Sand’s country home, where in the summer-time she was accustomed to gather about her, in what must have been house-parties of uncommon interest, most of the brilliant men and women of the day. All and sundry were welcome there, on the one condition of their possessing genius or charm. Liszt’s heart-friend, the Comtesse d’Agoult—“Marie”—was staying with George Sand when she thus sent, through Liszt, this characteristic invitation: “Marie told me that there was some hope of Chopin. Tell Chopin that I beg of him to

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

accompany you ; that Marie cannot live without him, and that I adore him." And, a few days later, she wrote again, to the Comtesse d'Agoult, who had evidently in the interval returned to Paris, " I want the fellows [Liszt and a pupil of his], I want them as soon and as *long* as possible. I want them *à mort*. I want also Chopin and all the Mickiewiczs and Grzymalas in the world. I want even Sue if you want him. What more would I not want if that were your fancy ? For instance, M. de Suzannet or Victor Schoelcher ! Everything, a lover excepted."

George Sand loved to have people about her, enjoyed being the good hostess, a characteristic, again, in which she was at the opposite pole to Chopin, who cared little for society—except that of *la haute noblesse*, a leaning which, if second nature to him from his early petting by grand dukes and duchesses, was not, his artistic *confrères* had the right to complain, without a touch of snobbishness. George Sand—that is Amantine Lucile Aurore Dupin—on the other hand, was, by inheritance, a singular blend of aristocrat and democrat, the royal blood of Augustus the Strong and of Louis XV running in her veins on her father's side, her mother being "the daughter of a Paris bird-seller," and "by the force of circumstances" something not far removed from a *cocotte* when General Dupin first saw and loved her at a small theatre in Italy, during Napoleon's Italian campaign. George Sand, whose devotion to her mother was a fine trait of her

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

generous character, used, perhaps not unreasonably, to boast of this fusion of blood, linking her on the one hand with kings and on the other with the people. She was unmistakably, by turns, a true daughter of both; and if the promiscuity of her attachments may seem to suggest the maternal strain, yet the high-handed manner in which she indulged them suggested rather the imperious, above-criticism wantonness of a great lady. If she was libertine, at least it was after the manner of princes.

When she met Chopin she had already run the gamut of many experiences, and the affair of Alfred de Musset was three years in the background. Chopin himself had but recently put behind him his devotion to Maria Wodzińska, a devotion that still lives for us in the waltz numbered "Op. 69, No. 1." A still earlier inspiration had been Constantia Gladowska, and, as is the way of poets and musicians, other less important fancies had lived and died to contribute their share towards the evolution of his temperament and the refinement of that peculiar sentiment of blended sorrow and beauty we call Chopinesque. "If," as Shakespeare's duke says, "music be the food of love," love is as certainly the necessary food of music, and if society objects to the process it must, logically, be content to go without the product: for an intense susceptibility to persons of the opposite sex is one of the first conditions of all artistic genius, perhaps of

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

any kind of genius. In this respect Chopin and George Sand were one, though the susceptibility in Chopin's case seems to have been more purely, so to say, for artistic purposes, less violent and unbridled in its vitality. It pushed him to no excesses, and seems to have been largely superficial, and easily wearied. More than with most musicians or poets, the sadness and beauty of Chopin's music seems to have come of his sensitiveness to the impersonal world-sadness of the world-beauty than to have been dependent on his personal history.

George Sand is quoted as saying of him that "although his heart was ardent and devoted, it was not continuously so to any one person, but surrendered itself alternately to five or six affections, each of which, as they struggled within it, got by turns the mastery over all the others. He would passionately love three women in the course of one evening party and forget them as soon as he had turned his back, while each of them imagined that she had exclusively charmed him." And George Sand goes on to tell this quaint story illustrative of the perishability of feelings which he actually deemed serious : "He had taken," she says, "a great fancy to the granddaughter of a celebrated master. He thought of asking her in marriage at the same time that he entertained the idea of another marriage in Poland—his loyalty being engaged nowhere, and his fickle heart floating from one passion to the other. The young Parisian

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

received him very kindly, and all went as well as could be till on going to visit her one day in company with another musician who was of more note in Paris than he at that time, she offered a chair to this gentleman before thinking of inviting Chopin to be seated. He never called on her again, and forgot her immediately."

Marriage for such a nature is obviously an absurd irrelevance. To such, a fair face is merely the passing accident of inspiration, the symbol of universal feelings, with as little individual claim on the musician as the particular skylark that inspired Shelley, or the particular daisy that inspired Wordsworth.

In this respect, then, Chopin and George Sand appear to have been well matched, and on neither side does there seem to have been opportunity for heart-break.

Whatever power George Sand held over him, Chopin, therefore, ran no tragic risk in visiting Nohant, and that first visit of his there in the summer of 1837 has less the aspect of a dawning love affair than the beginning of a semi-matrimonial comradeship. Details of this visit, as also of a second visit in the following summer of 1830, are wanting. In the winter of 1837, however, we first hear of Chopin's consumptive tendency, and it was the fear of spending another winter in the inclement air of Paris that brought about the famous Sand-Chopin sojourn in Majorca, of which

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

so much has been written and which first set the gossips going. Actually, there seems little in the episode so outrageously defiant of *les convenances*, when the plain facts are considered. George Sand, who had recently won legal freedom from her boorish husband—a husband who had for years been calmly living on her inheritance, and giving her nothing but a paltry allowance from her own money—had won with it the guardianship of her son Maurice and her daughter Solange, to whom she was tenderly devoted. The lad suffered from rheumatism, and his mother had planned to take him south for the winter. Seeing that Chopin stood in like need of a warmer climate, it seems natural and proper enough that the friends should join forces. Here is George Sand's account of the matter, which seems reasonable enough :

“As I was making my plans and preparations for departure, Chopin, whom I saw every day and whose genius and character I tenderly loved, said to me that if he were in Maurice's place he would soon recover. I believed it, and I was mistaken. I did not put him in the place of Maurice on the journey, but beside Maurice. His friends had for long urged him to go and spend some time in the south of Europe. People believed that he was consumptive. Gaubert examined him and declared to me that he was not. ‘You will save him, in fact,’ he said to me, ‘if you give him air, exercise, and rest.’ Others, knowing well that Chopin would never make up his

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

mind to leave the society and life of Paris without being carried off by a person whom he loved and who was devoted to him, urged me strongly not to oppose the desire he showed so *à propos* and in a quite unhoped-for way. As time showed, I was wrong in yielding to their hopes and my own solicitude. It was indeed enough to go abroad alone with two children, one already ill, the other full of exuberant health and spirits, without taking upon myself also a terrible anxiety and a physician's responsibility."

George Sand, therefore, set out for the South of France with her two children, in November, 1838, stopping at various places of interest on the way, leaving Chopin to make up his mind whether or not he would join her in Perpignan. This he did not fail to do. "Chopin arrived at Perpignan last night," wrote George Sand to her friend, Madame Marliani, in that "mothering" vein which characterizes all her references to her friend, "fresh as a rose, and rosy as a turnip ; moreover, in good health, having stood his four nights of the mail-coach heroically." Thence they took ship to Barcelona, whence, after a day or two's sight-seeing, they shipped again for Palma, the capital of Majorca, where they arrived without mishap, to find the anticipated summer-heat awaiting them—but with it, alas ! a pitiful paucity of accommodation, not to mention "vermin in their beds and scorpions in their soup." In the neighbourhood of the town,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

however, they found a small villa to rent, which, at first sight, seemed promising. "I am leaving the town," wrote George Sand to her friend Madame Marliani once more, "and shall establish myself in the country : I have a pretty furnished house, with a garden and a magnificent view, for fifty francs per month. Besides, two leagues from there I have a cell, that is to say, three rooms and a garden full of oranges and lemons, for thirty-five francs *per year*, in the large monastery of Valdemosa."

All seemed delightful for the moment, and Chopin wrote thus enthusiastically to his friend Fontana :

"MY DEAR FRIEND :—

"I am at Palma, among palms, cedars, cactuses, aloes, and olive, orange, lemon, fig, and pomegranate trees, etc., which the Jardin des Plantes possesses only thanks to its stoves. The sky is like a turquoise, the sea is like lazuli, and the mountains are like emeralds. The air ? The air is just as in heaven. During the day there is sunshine, and consequently it is warm—everybody wears summer clothes. During the night guitars and songs are heard everywhere and at all hours. Enormous balconies with vines overhead, Moorish walls. . . . The town, like everything here, looks towards Africa. . . . In one word, a charming life !

"Dear Julius, go to Pleyel—the piano has not yet arrived—and ask him by what route they have sent it. The Preludes you shall have soon.

"I shall probably take up my quarters in a

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

delightful monastery in one of the most beautiful sites in the world : sea, mountains, palm trees, cemetery, church of the Knights of the Cross, ruins of mosques, thousand-year-old olive trees ! . . . Ah, my dear friend, I am now enjoying life a little more ; I am near what is most beautiful—I am a better man.”

But clouds were soon to darken this paradise. The piano referred to was to be one of their first troubles. Not only had it “ not yet arrived,” but was not to arrive for another two months, being held up by the exorbitancy of the Palma customs, who demanded no less than seven hundred francs duty upon it. A compromise, at three hundred francs, however, was eventually reached, and the desired instrument at last housed in the great haunted monastery, to contribute its share in one of the most famous compositions of the great composer, whose sensitive soul had in the interval suffered no little vexation from a wretched native instrument, which was probably as great a hardship to him as the rainy season setting in shortly after their arrival, the miserable food, and a sudden alarming attack of his complaint, brought on by the inclement weather. Chopin’s illness, far from winning sympathy from the inhospitable islanders, who had begun to look on the party askance and to make provisioning difficult, because of their non-attendance at church, brought an imperative notice

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

to quit from the Spanish landlord, ignorantly panic-stricken with fear of infection, and a preposterous bill for white-washing and replastering his house. Chopin's refusal to be bled had prejudiced the medical authorities, so the distinguished refugees were only too glad to find lodgings in the old Valde-mosa monastery, where, if there were plenty of inconveniences, there was at least no little compensating romance. A more dramatic retreat can hardly be imagined than this huge pile of deserted buildings, with its endless cells and chapels and cloisters, and gardens high up among the hills, screamed over by eagles and echoing with the roar of mountain torrents and the sound of the sea. In her book, *Un Hiver à Majorque*, George Sand has described the place and their various experiences there in her splendidly vivid way. Here is one of her pictures :

“I never heard the wind sound so like mournful voices and utter such despairing howls as in these empty and sonorous galleries. The noise of the torrents, the swift motion of the clouds, the grand, monotonous sound of the sea, interrupted by the whistling of the storm and the plaintive cries of seabirds which passed, quite terrified and bewildered, in the squalls ; then thick fogs which fell suddenly like a shroud and which, penetrating into the cloisters through the broken arcades, rendered us invisible, and made the little lamp we carried to guide us appear like a will-o'-the-wisp wandering under the

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

galleries ; and a thousand other details of this monastic life which crowd all at once into my memory : all combined made indeed this monastery the most romantic abode in the world.

“ I was not sorry to see for once fully and in reality what I had seen only in a dream, or in the fashionable ballads, and in the nuns’ scene in *Robert le Diable* at the Opéra. Even fantastic apparitions were not wanting to us.”

But life at the monastery was not all storm and screaming eagles, and had it not been for Chopin’s cough, the trouble with the piano, and the difficulty of food supplies, these further idyllic-domestic glimpses prove how ideal it might well have been, and now and again actually was. Writing on January 15, 1839, to Madame Marliani, George Sand says :

“ We inhabit the Carthusian monastery of Valdemosa, a really sublime place, which I have hardly the time to admire, so many occupations have I with my children, their lessons, and my work. . . . Happily, Maurice is in admirable health ; his constitution is only afraid of frost, a thing unknown here. But the little Chopin is very depressed and always coughs much. For his sake I await with impatience the return of fine weather, which will not be long in coming. . . . I am plunged with Maurice in Thucydides and company ; with Solange in the indirect object and the agreement of the participle. Chopin plays on a poor Majorcan piano

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

which reminds me of that of Bouffé in *Pauvre Jacques*. I pass my nights generally in scrawling. When I raise my nose, it is to see through the skylight of my cell the moon which shines in the midst of the rain on the orange trees, and I think no more of it than she."

Again, a few days later :

"The climate is delicious. At the time I am writing, Maurice is gardening in his shirt-sleeves, and Solange, seated under an orange tree loaded with fruit, studies her lesson with a grave air. We have bushes covered with roses, and spring is coming in ! Our winter lasted six weeks, not cold, but rainy to a degree to frighten us. It is a deluge !"

Still again, a month later, the Pleyel piano having now arrived :

"You see me at my Carthusian monastery, still sedentary, and occupied during the day with my children, at night with my work. In the midst of all this the warbling of Chopin, who goes his usual pretty way, and whom the walls of the cell are much astonished to hear."

On the whole, this Majorca experience, whatever its drawbacks, had many poetic compensations, and one may well echo the sentiment of Chopin's biographer, Niecks, when he says : "I like to picture to myself the vaulted cell, in which Pleyel's piano sounded so magnificently, illumined by a lamp, the rich traceries of the Gothic chair

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

shadowed on the wall, George Sand absorbed in her studies, her children at play, and Chopin pouring out his soul in music."

Genius has certainly been less fortunately circumstanced, nor was the time by any means unmomentous for Chopin's art. In fact, though musical critics disagree on the matter, there seems little doubt that some of the master's most characteristic compositions were either written, perfected, or inspired to the accompaniment of those winter tempests that so sorely tried his lungs and depressed his spirits. It seems likely that we owe some of the Preludes and the great G Minor Ballade to this winter with George Sand in Valdemosa. George Sand gives a vivid account of the composition of the famous Sixth Prelude, and, though the accuracy of her memory has been doubted and her "novelist's" method somewhat over-criticized, an extract from it, at all events, makes delightful reading :

"The poor great artist was a detestable patient. What I had feared, but unfortunately not enough, happened. He became completely demoralized. Bearing pain courageously enough, he could not overcome the disquietude of his imagination. The monastery for him was full of terrors and phantoms, even when he was well. He did not say so, and I had to guess it. On returning from my nocturnal explorations in the ruins with my children, I found him at ten o'clock at night before his piano, his

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

face pale, his eyes wild, and his hair almost standing on end. It was some moments before he could recognize us. He then made an attempt to laugh, and played to us sublime things he had just composed, or rather, to be more accurate, terrible or heartrending ideas which had taken possession of him, as it were without his knowledge, in that hour of solitude, sadness, and terror.

“It was there that he composed the most beautiful of those short pages he modestly entitled ‘*Préludes*.’ They are masterpieces. Several present to the mind visions of deceased monks and the sounds of the funeral chants which beset his imagination; others are melancholy and sweet—they occurred to him in the hours of sunshine and of health, with the noise of the children’s laughter under the window, the distant sound of guitars, the warbling of the birds among the humid foliage, and the sight of the pale little full-blown roses on the snow.

“Others again are of a mournful sadness, and, while charming the ear, rend the heart. There is one of them which occurred to him on a dismal, rainy evening which produces a terrible mental depression. We had left him well that day, Maurice and I, and had gone to Palma to buy things we required for our encampment. The rain had come on, the torrents had overflowed, we had travelled three leagues in six hours to return in the midst of the inundation, and we arrived in the dead of night,

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

without boots, abandoned by our driver, having passed through unheard-of dangers. We made haste, anticipating the anxiety of our invalid. It had been indeed great, but it had become as it were congealed into a kind of calm despair and he played his wonderful prelude weeping. On seeing us enter he rose, uttering a great cry, then he said to us, with a wild look and in a strange tone, ‘ Ah ! I knew well that you were dead ! ’

“ When he had come to himself again, and saw the state in which we were, he was ill at the retrospective spectacle of our dangers ; but he confessed to me afterwards that while waiting for our return he had seen all this in a dream and that, no longer distinguishing this dream from reality, he had grown calm and been almost lulled to sleep while playing the piano, believing that he was dead himself. He saw himself drowned in a lake ; heavy and ice-cold drops of water fell at regular intervals upon his breast, and when I drew his attention to those drops of water which were actually falling at regular intervals upon the roof, he denied having heard them. He was even vexed at what I translated by the term imitative harmony. He protested with all his might, and he was right, against the puerility of these imitations for the ear. His genius was full of mysterious harmonies of nature, translated by sublime equivalents into his musical thought, and not by a servile repetition of external sounds. His composition of this evening was

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

indeed full of the drops of rain which resounded on the sonorous tiles of the monastery, but they were transformed in his imagination and his music into tears falling from heaven on his heart."

Still, in spite of the fascinations of spring, civilized France was beginning to seem good again. Chopin, too, was spitting blood. So, after a stay in Marseilles, and a trip to Genoa, the scene once more shifts to Nohant. At Nohant lived an excellent physician, Dr. Papet, a friend of George Sand's, who was good for Chopin, if only for the reason that he took a cheerful view of his case, which seems for the time to have lost its serious aspect, and there, too, were many friends in whose society Chopin took pleasure, and were, George Sand says, "disposed to spoil him as I did." Considerable petting and spoiling seems to have been a necessity of the great composer's existence, and herein, no doubt, George Sand found a congenial *métier*, though there seems no doubt that her "detestable patient" to a great degree came justly by the adjective.

"All, then, went very well at first," George Sand continues, "and I entertained eventually the idea that Chopin might rest and regain his health by spending a few summers with us, his work necessarily calling him back to Paris in the winter."

As it proved, that work called George Sand back to Paris too, and from now on to the final rupture of their friendship, and to within a year of Chopin's death, their two lives were to be lived side by side,

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

in Paris as neighbours, and at Nohant as hostess and guest. For, to glance again at the supposedly outraged *convenances*, Chopin "lived with" George Sand, both in Paris and at Nohant, neither more nor less, on the surface at least, than any other of her intimate acquaintance. At Nohant he was one among other of her visitors, and in Paris, though he was her next-door neighbour, occupying one of her *pavillons* in the Rue Pigalle, and later a house of his own, next to hers, Madame Marliani occupying a third, in the Cité (Court or Square) d'Orléans, his establishment was always distinct from hers, and his regard for the seemliness of their relationship was scrupulous. "Chopin," says Niecks, "treated George Sand with the greatest respect and devotion; he was always *aux petits soins* with her. It is characteristic of the man and exemplifies strikingly the delicacy of his taste and feeling that his demeanour in her house showed in no way the intimate relation in which he stood to the mistress of it: he seemed to be a guest like any other occasional visitor."

Niecks tells one or two anecdotes, which give charming glimpses of the two together among their friends. On one occasion George Sand had been rhapsodizing on the charms of country life.

"How well you have spoken!" said Chopin naïvely.

"You think so?" she replied. "Well, then, set me to music!"

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

“Hereupon Chopin improvised a veritable pastoral symphony, and George Sand, placing herself beside him and laying her hand gently on his shoulder, said : ‘Go on, velvet fingers [*Courage, doigts de velours*]!’”

Here is another anecdote :

“George Sand had a little dog which was in the habit of turning round and round in the endeavour to catch its tail. One evening when it was thus engaged, she said to Chopin : ‘If I had your talent, I would compose a pianoforte piece for this dog.’ Chopin at once sat down to the piano, and improvised the charming Waltz in D flat (Op. 64), which hence has obtained the name of *Valse du petit chien*.”

An apparently incongruous gift which must have contributed no little to Chopin’s social charm was a talent for mimicry to which Balzac has alluded in “*Un Homme d’Affaires*,” and to which he would occasionally have recourse, as with a sudden right-about-face, whimsically to relieve the tension after his playing of some particularly overwrought composition. “After having plunged his audience,” writes George Sand, “into a profound *recueillement*, or into a painful sadness, for his music sometimes discouraged one’s soul terribly, especially when he improvised, he would suddenly, as if to take away the impression and remembrance of his sorrow from others and from himself, turn stealthily to a glass, arrange his hair and his cravat, and show

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

himself suddenly transformed into a phlegmatic Englishman, into an impertinent old man, into a sentimental and ridiculous Englishwoman, into a sordid Jew. The types were always sad, however comical they might be, but perfectly conceived and so delicately rendered that one could not grow weary of admiring them.

“All these sublime, charming, or *bizarre* things that he knew how to evolve out of himself made him the soul of select society, and there was literally a contest for his company, his noble character, his disinterestedness, his self-respect, his proper pride, enemy of every vanity of bad taste and of every insolent *réclame*, the security of intercourse with him, and the exquisite delicacy of his manners, making him a friend equally serious and agreeable.”

George Sand, too, gives an admirable account of Chopin's travail of composition, which incidentally illustrates the service to his art of her sympathetic comradeship :

“His creation was spontaneous and miraculous. He found it without seeking it, without foreseeing it. It came on his piano suddenly, complete, sublime, or it sang in his head during a walk, and he was impatient to play it to himself. But then began the most heart-rending labour I ever saw. It was a series of efforts, of irresolutions, and of frettings to seize again certain details of the theme he had heard ; what he had conceived as a whole he analyzed too much when wishing to write it, and his

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

regret at not finding it again, in his opinion, clearly defined, threw him into a kind of despair. He shut himself up in his room for whole days, weeping, walking, breaking his pens, repeating and altering a bar a hundred times, writing and effacing it as many times, and recommencing the next day with a minute and desperate perseverance. He spent six weeks over a single page, to write it at last as he had noted it down at the very first.

“I had for a long time been able to make him consent to trust to this first inspiration. But when he was no longer disposed to believe me, he reproached me gently with having spoiled him and with not being severe enough for him. I tried to amuse him, to take him out for walks. Sometimes, taking away all my brood in a country *char-à-bancs*, I dragged him away in spite of himself from this agony. I took him to the banks of the Creuse, and after being for two or three days lost amid sunshine and rain in frightful roads, we arrived, cheerful and famished, at some magnificently situated place where he seemed to revive. These fatigues knocked him up for the first day, but he slept. The last day he was quite revived, quite rejuvenated in returning to Nohant, and he found the solution of his work without too much effort; but it was not always possible to prevail upon him to leave that piano which was much oftener his torment than his joy, and by degrees he showed temper when I disturbed him. I dared not insist. Chopin when angry was

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

alarming, and as, with me, he always restrained himself, he seemed almost to choke and die."

I must make room for one or two glimpses of the summer life at Nohant, brilliant as it must have been with the associated gifts of the many clever and charming people for ever coming and going. Writes Charles Rollinat, a friend of George Sand's :

"The hospitality there was comfortable, and the freedom absolute. There were guns and dogs for those who loved hunting, boats and nets for those who loved fishing, a splendid garden to walk in. Every one did as he liked. Liszt and Chopin composed; Pauline Garcia studied her *rôle* of the *Prophète*; the mistress of the house wrote a romance or a drama; and it was the same with the others. At six o'clock they assembled again to dine, and did not part company till two or three o'clock in the morning. Chopin rarely played. He could only be prevailed upon to play when he was sure of perfection. Nothing in the world would have made him consent to play indifferently. Liszt, on the contrary, played always, well or badly."

Chopin, in some of his gayer moods, would invent a pantomime, and improvise at the piano to the antics of the various performers. Says George Sand :

"The whole thing began by pantomime, and this was of Chopin's invention; he occupied the place at the piano and improvised, while the young people gesticulated scenes and danced comic ballets.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

. . . He led them as he pleased and made them pass, according to his fancy, from the droll to the severe, from the burlesque to the solemn, from the graceful to the passionate. We improvised costumes in order to play successively several rôles. As soon as the artist saw them appear, he adapted his theme and his accent in a marvellous manner to their respective characters. This went on for three evenings, and then the master, setting out for Paris, left us thoroughly stirred up, enthusiastic, and determined not to suffer the spark which had electrified us to be lost."

Here is another glimpse given by the great painter, Eugène Delacroix :

"The place is very pleasant, and the hosts do their utmost to please me. When we are not assembled to dine, breakfast, play at billiards, or walk, we are in our rooms, reading, or resting on our sofas. Now and then there come to you through the window opening on the garden whiffs of the music of Chopin, who is working in his room ; this mingles with the song of the nightingales and the odour of the roses. You see that so far I am not much to be pitied, and, nevertheless, work must come to give the grain of salt to all this. This life is too easy, I must purchase it with a little racking of my brains ; and, like the huntsman who eats with more appetite when he has got his skin torn by bushes, one must strive a little after ideas in order to feel the charm of doing nothing."

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

Such was this famous love-affair, or sentimental comradeship, such its even, unsensational tenor. For ten years it lasted, a long life for any heart relationship; and then, probably in June, 1847, came the end, suddenly for the spectator, but perhaps, for some time previous, anticipated by George Sand. Various versions are given of the incidental cause, but the probability is that, on George Sand's side at all events, its emotional vitality had died out, and that she had grown tired of her "detestable patient," with his wayward moods and his perpetual drain on her consideration. She writes thus of the rupture to her friend Charles Poncy, whose wife is the "Désirez" referred to:

"You have understood, Désirez and you, you whose soul is delicate because it is ardent, that I passed through the gravest and most painful phase of my life. I nearly succumbed, although I had foreseen it for a long time. But you know one is not always under the pressure of a sinister foresight, however evident it may be. There are days, weeks, entire months even, when one lives on illusions, and when one flatters one's self one is turning aside the blow which threatens one. At last, the most probable misfortune always surprises us disarmed and unprepared. In addition to this development of the unhappy germ, which was going on unnoticed, there have arisen several very bitter and altogether unexpected accessory circumstances. The result is that I am broken in soul and body with chagrin.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

I believe that this chagrin is incurable ; for the better I succeed in freeing myself from it for some hours, the more sombre and poignant does it re-enter into me in the following hours. . . .”

The “several very bitter and altogether unexpected accessory circumstances” referred to are variously given by various acquaintance. Some attributed the separation to Chopin’s anger at what he, and others, considered a caricature of him as “Prince Karol” in George Sand’s novel of “Lucrezia Floriani.” Others hint that she was jealous of her own daughter Solange, whose marriage with the sculptor Clésinger Chopin is said to have violently opposed—though this latter statement does not seem compatible with the better authenticated story that, shortly after their marriage George Sand had quarrelled with her daughter and son-in-law and turned them both out of the Nohant house, writing to Chopin at the time forbidding him to receive them in Paris. On receiving this command of his mistress, Chopin had turned to his friend Franchomme, and said, “They have only me, and should I close my door upon them ? No, I shall not do it !” “And he did not do it,” adds Franchomme, “and yet he knew that this creature whom he adored would not forgive it him. Poor friend, how I have seen him suffer !”

And George Sand did not forgive him. Niecks accepts this incident as the final determining cause, but considers that the end had been for some time

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

on the way, and that Liszt has accurately expressed the psychology of the situation in this passage :

“ These commencements, of which Madame de Staël spoke [*en amour, il n’y a que des commencements*], had already for a long time been exhausted between the Polish artist and the French poet. They had only survived with the one by a violent effort of respect for the ideal which he had gilded with its fatal brilliancy ; with the other by a false shame which sophisticated on the pretension to preserve constancy in fidelity. The time came when this factitious existence, which succeeded no longer in galvanizing fibres dried up under the eyes of the spiritualistic artist, seemed to him to surpass what honour permitted him not to perceive. No one knew what was the cause or the pretext of the sudden rupture ; one saw only that after a violent opposition to the marriage of the daughter of the house, Chopin abruptly left Nohant never to return again.”

However it had come about, the end had come, and George Sand and Chopin met but once again, and then but for an agitated moment in the *salon* of a friend. “ I held his hand,” wrote George Sand of the occasion, “ trembling and cold as ice. I wished to speak to him, but he escaped me.” And that was all. Chopin’s life, too, was near its end. He had always been superstitious, we are told, in regard to the number seven, would not have taken a house which bore the number seven, or set out on

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

a journey on a date including the number. He had met George Sand in a year including the fatal number (1837), had parted from her in a year similarly inauspicious (1847), and the date of his death was to include a seven—being October 17, 1849. It seems certain that George Sand was much in his thoughts in his closing hours, for, as has been said above, two days before the end, he turned to his friend Franchomme with the words, "She had said to me that I would die in no arms but hers." Once more evidence conflicts as to whether or not George Sand attempted to fulfil this promise. One version goes that she sent some one to inquire after him, being too occupied with the production of a new play to come herself; another that she did actually come, but was dissuaded by those in attendance, one of those being her own daughter Solange. One prefers to believe the kinder version, which seems more likely to be true, and to be more in keeping with George Sand's character, which, whatever its faults, was generous and the reverse of unforgiving. That character has perhaps never had full justice done to it, and in regard to her relations with Chopin too many critics have been all too ready to believe the worst. That she should tire of him, however painfully it may have affected him, was surely not a crime. "The world takes it for granted," says Niecks, with welcome common sense, "that the wife or paramour of a man of genius is in duty bound to sacrifice herself for him."

FREDERIC CHOPIN AND GEORGE SAND

But how does the matter stand when there is genius on both sides, and self-sacrifice of either party entails loss to the world ? By the way, is it not very selfish and hypocritical of this world which generally does so little for men of genius to demand that women shall entirely, self-denyingly devote themselves to their gifted lovers ? Well, both George Sand and Chopin had to do work worth doing, and, if one of them was hampered by the other in doing it, the dissolution of the union was justified."

Actually, it seems to me that George Sand gave more to Chopin than she ever received in return. With her own burden of genius to carry, she attempted lovingly and faithfully to carry his too, through ten of the most fruitful years of his life ; and we who care nowadays more for his music than for her books should gratefully remember this to her everlasting credit.

XI

MICHAEL ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

SOPHOCLES is credited by Plato with the saying, in regard to the fading of the passions with the advance of age, that it is "like being set free from service to a band of madmen." This saying fitly comes to mind with the mention of the names of Michael Angelo and Vittoria Colonna, for it is the significance of the legend which thus links their names together that it is the record of a feeling, an impassioned friendship, which could only have been experienced by two who had arrived at that tranquil period of life, when, freed from the turmoil of the senses, it is first possible to realize a love, the ardours of which shall be purely of the spirit. The character of Michael Angelo's work, the cosmic austerity of the beauty that informs it—a beauty such as Wordsworth saw upon the face of Duty—

"Thou dost preserve the stars from wrong ;
And the most ancient Heavens, through thee, are fresh
and strong "

does not suggest him as ever, at any time during his long life, having been a votary of any goddess more

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

luxurious than the Uranian Aphrodite. Perhaps in the mysterious economy of Providence, it was the fist of his fellow-pupil Torrigiano, breaking his nose, that early day in the Medici gardens, that protected him by the disfigurement of which he was lifelong sensitive, and preserved his passionate sense of beauty from the wasteful diffusion of light loves. Not improbably, too, his grave, ambitious boyhood had come under the influence of the Platonic ideal of beauty, as he could have heard it expounded any day by the humanist Marsilio Ficino at the learned reunions in his patron's mansion. On one of these occasions he may well have had his feet set upon that ladder of ideal Love, which Plato so vividly pictures in "The Symposium": "beginning from these beautiful objects here below ever to be going up higher, with that other beauty in view; using them as steps of a ladder; mounting from the love of one fair person to the love of two; and from the love of two to the love of all; and from the love of beautiful persons to the love of beautiful employments, and from the love of beautiful employments to the love of beautiful kinds of knowledge; till he passes from degrees of knowledge to that knowledge which is the knowledge of nothing else save the absolute Beauty itself, and knows it at length as in itself it really is."

Dante, too, and Savonarola were the stern mentors of his young manhood, as their spirit and teachings

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

continued to sustain him throughout the whole of his lonely and turbulent existence. It is true that in his later years he hints remorsefully at "confusions of a wasted youth," and that some of his sonnets and madrigals are unplatonicly warm in colouring; yet austere old age is apt thus retrospectively to indulge in fanciful repentance, and it is probable that the poetry thus warmly coloured was addressed to no specific individuals, but followed the poetic fashion of the time, in thus concretely embodying abstract ideas and enthusiasms. Passionate worshipper of physical beauty as Michael Angelo's work proves him to have been, the spirit in which he worshipped it is shown by that very work to have been that of one for whom visible beauty was first and last the sacramental symbol of the invisible eternal beauty; and, whether or not his life had known infidelities to his ideal, the loftiness of that ideal is not to be questioned. Nor, outside the negligible innuendoes of the vile Pietro Aretino, was any found to speak ill of his personal life. On the contrary, the testimony is all of the tenor of the annalist Ammirato, who, under the year 1564, writes: "Buonarroti having lived for ninety years, there was never found through all that length of time, and with all that liberty to sin, anyone who could with right and justice impute to him a stain or any ugliness of manners." The testimony of his beloved pupil and biographer, Condivi, is to the same effect. "Often-

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

times have I heard Michaelangelo discoursing and expounding on the theme of love, and have afterwards gathered from those who were present upon these occasions that he spoke precisely as Plato wrote—I am sure, too, that no vile thoughts were born in him, by this token, that he loved not only the beauty of human beings, but in general all fair things, as a beautiful horse, a beautiful dog, a beautiful piece of country, a beautiful plant, a beautiful mountain, a beautiful wood, and every site or thing in its kind fair and rare, admiring them with marvellous affection.”

Indeed, one of his most beautiful sonnets might well be regarded as a commentary upon the passage of Plato above quoted :

“I saw no mortal beauty with these eyes
When perfect peace in thy fair eyes I found ;
But far within, where all is holy ground,
My soul felt Love, her comrade of the skies :
For she was born with God in Paradise ;
Else should we still to transient loves be bound ;
But, finding these so false, we pass beyond
Unto the Love of Loves that never dies.
Nay, things that die cannot assuage the thirst
Of souls undying ; nor Eternity
Serves Time, where all must fade that flourisheth.
Sense is not love, but lawlessness accurst :
This kills the soul ; while our love lifts on high
Our friends on earth—higher in heaven through death.”

When, or to whom, this sonnet was written we have no record. It may well have been written to Vittoria Colonna, but, whether or not, it faithfully represents the quality of the only “love” for a

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

woman which is known to have entered into the life of the apocalyptic creator of sibyls and demi-gods.

Vittoria Colonna, indeed, in character and by reason of all the circumstances of her life, seems, so to say, Michaelangellesque in stature and general impressiveness, an heroic figure of a woman, filled with the large spirit of his own creations. Princess of one of the proudest families of Italy, illustrious for beauty and learning, a poet whom Ariosto had praised, a great lady who united all the brilliance of this world with a picturesque piety, romantic both by personality and position, lit too by the stormy and sorrowful lights of her own history and that of her house, just then at a tragic turn of its fortunes, her figure stands out with more than individual significance, a veritable sibyl of the Renaissance. Married at nineteen to the Marchese di Pescara, she had, in her passionate devotion for him, known all of love in the earthly sense she was to know. Early left a widow, her sorrow had made her a poet and turned her thoughts to God—so seriously that Pope Clement VII. had to prevent her by force from taking the veil. It is impossible to name with certainty the year in which Vittoria Colonna and Michael Angelo first met. In 1534, on the death of Clement VII., Michael Angelo had left Florence for ever, and taken up his residence in Rome. If then, as seems most probable, he had not made Vittoria's acquaintance during previous visits there, it seems hardly

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA-

doubtful that he must now have done so, and have naturally been offered a distinguished welcome in that circle of philosophers and literati which it was the widowed Marchesa's pleasure to gather about her in the cloistered retirement of her Roman villa.

Michael Angelo was then fifty-nine years old, Vittoria forty-four, and one immediate bond of sympathy between the two would be their common interest in religious matters, particularly the reform of the Church, a restoration of it to evangelical purity, that "reformation from within" the leading spirits of which, before long to be crushed by the Catholic reaction as embodied in the Inquisition, were Vittoria's most intimate friends. These friendships were later on to bring Vittoria herself into grave danger, from which only her rank protected her; but, meanwhile, the reforming party was powerful and the pious reunions at the Villa Colonna were left in peace. There exists a very charming description of one of these reunions in the reminiscences of the miniature-painter Francisco d'Ollanda, who resided in Rome during the year 1530 and 1540, on an artistic mission from his master the King of Portugal. Francisco was *persona grata* in Vittoria's circle, and he gives so living a picture of the gracious way of life of that noble lady as he recalls her one Sunday afternoon in the spring of 1537, seated in the quiet little convent church of San Silvestro on Monte Cavallo, in

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

the company of Michael Angelo and others, listening to an exposition of St. Paul's epistles by a famous divine of her own persuasion, that I wish it were possible to quote the whole. One or two extracts, however, will convey some of the beautiful calm of that far-away afternoon.

The church still stands, and one may still trace the path up the hillside through the Colonna gardens so often taken by Vittoria in search of contemplation and spiritual intercourse with the quiet sisters, she herself hardly less a nun than they. Francisco tells how, on that particular afternoon, calling at the house of his friend Lattanzio Tolomei, he had found a message left for him to the effect that Tolomei had accompanied the Marchesa to the church of San Silvestro, for the purpose of hearing Brother Ambrose of Siena discourse upon Saint Paul. Francisco was invited to follow on. "And so," writes Francisco, "I started off for San Silvestro. Vittoria Colonna, the Marchesa di Pescara, and sister of Ascanio Colonna, is one of the noblest and most famous women in Italy, and in the whole world. She is beautiful, pure in conduct, and acquainted with the Latin tongue; in short, she is adorned with every grace which can redound to a woman's praise. Weary of the brilliant life which she formerly led, she has quite devoted herself, since the death of her husband, to thoughts on Christ and to study; she supports the needy of her sex, and stands forth as a

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

model of genuine Catholic piety. She was the intimate friend of Tolomei, and I owe her acquaintance to him.

“ I entered : they asked me to take a place, and the reading and exposition of the Epistles were continued. When it was ended the Marchesa spoke ; and, looking at me and Tolomei, she said, ‘ I am not quite wrong if I imagine that Messer Francisco would rather listen to Michael Angelo upon painting than Fra Ambrosio upon the Pauline Epistles.’ ”

This was a playful dig at Francisco, as he was well known among his acquaintance for the assiduity with which he button-holed Michael Angelo on all occasions, perhaps, as he himself half hints, somewhat to the great man’s weariness. The Marchesa followed up her suggestion, by calling one of her retinue :

“ ‘ Do you know Michael Angelo’s dwelling ? Go, and tell him that I and Messer Tolomei are here in the chapel, where it is beautifully cool—the church, too, is private and agreeable ; and that I beg to ask him whether he is inclined to lose a few hours here in our society, and to turn them into gain for us. But not a word that the gentleman from Spain is here.’ ”

“ I could not refrain from remarking, in a low tone, to Tolomei, with what art the Marchesa knew how to treat the slightest thing. She inquired what we were saying. ‘ Oh ! ’ answered Tolomei, ‘ he said with what wisdom Your Excellency

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

went to work even in so trifling a message. For, as Michael Angelo knows, that, when he once meets Messer Francisco, there is no possibility of separating : he avoids him wherever he can.’

“‘I have remarked it,’ said the Marchesa ; ‘I know Michael Angelo. But it will be difficult to bring him to speak on painting. . . .’

“The Marchesa and Tolomei laughed. After some moments, in which neither of them spoke, we heard knocking at the door. Every one feared that it could not be Michael Angelo, who lived down below on Monte Cavallo. Fortunately, however, the servant met him close by San Silvestro, and he was just on the point of going to the Thermal. He was coming up the Esquiline Way, in conversation with his colour-grinder, Urbino ; he fell at once into the snare, and it was he who knocked at the door.

“The Marchesa rose to receive him, and remained standing some time until she had made him take a place between herself and Tolomei. I now also seated myself at a little distance from them. At first they were silent ; then, however, the Marchesa, who could never speak without elevating those with whom she conversed and even the place where she was, began to lead the conversation with the greatest art upon all possible things, without, however, touching even remotely upon painting. She wished to give Michael Angelo assurance. She proceeded as if approaching an unassailable fortress, so long as he was on his guard. But at last he

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

yielded. 'It is an old experience,' she said, 'that no one can rise against Michael Angelo, who would contend against him with his own weapons; that is, with mind and art. And so you will see there is only one means of having the last word with him; and that is to speak of lawsuits or painting, and he shall not say a word more.'

"'Or rather,' I now remarked from my corner, 'the very best means of wearying Michael Angelo out would be simply to let him know that I am here; for he has not seen me up to this moment. Of course, the surest means of concealing from him anything as unimportant as I am was to come close under his eyes.'

"'Pardon, Messer Francisco,' he called out, turning with astonishment to me, 'it was impossible to see you. I saw no one here but the Marchesa. But, since you are providentially there, come as a colleague to my help. . . .'

"'His Holiness,' said the Marchesa, again renewing the conversation, 'has had the goodness to grant me permission to build a new convent in this immediate neighbourhood, half-way up Monte Cavallo, where the tower stands from which Nero looked down on the burning city. The footsteps of pious women are to efface the traces of the wicked. I don't know, Michael Angelo, how I shall have the building erected—how large, and facing which side. The old wall, perhaps, might still be employed.'

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

“ ‘Certainly,’ he replied : ‘ the old tower might hold the bells. I see no difficulty in this building. We would, if Your Excellency likes, take a view of the place on the way home.’ ”

“ ‘ I had not ventured to ask this,’ answered she ; ‘ but I see the words of our Lord, “ Every one that exalteth himself shall be abased, and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted,” are truer under all circumstances. But you understand how to give conscientiously where others only lavish at random, and therefore your friends rank yourself so much higher than your works ; and those who only know your works and not yourself value that in you which can be only called perfect on a lower scale. I cannot but admire the manner in which you withdraw yourself from the world, from useless conversation, and from all the offers of princes, who desire paintings from your hand—how you avoid it all, and how you have disposed the labour of your whole life as one single great work.’ ”

“ ‘ Gracious lady,’ replied Michael Angelo, ‘ these are undeserved praises ; but, as the conversation has taken this turn, I must here complain of the public. A thousand silly reproaches are brought against artists of importance. They say that they are strange people, that they are not to be approached, that there is no bearing with them. No one, on the contrary, can be so natural and human as great artists.’ ”

How clearly, as in a painting, the various

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

personalities come before us in this delightful dialogue, and how naturally the whole atmosphere, even the tones of the voices are conveyed to us, and the very accent of the courtly affectionate intimacy between the two illustrious friends, so marked on each side with a sort of tender reverence, involuntarily caught. It seems evident that they must have been familiar friends for some time, and from other references it is certain that they had been in correspondence, before Vittoria's final settlement in Rome, during her frequent absences on her estates at Ischia, or in conventual retirement at Orvieto and Viterbo. Some years after her death, Michael Angelo writes of his being in possession of many letters written to him by her from those cities, together with a parchment volume of one hundred and forty-three sonnets which she had from time to time given or sent to him. Of their correspondence but six letters remain, two from Michael Angelo and four from Vittoria, and the first of these is dated as late as 1545. This is from Michael Angelo, written in response to certain poems for which he desires to make some return.

"I desired, lady," the letter runs, "before I accepted the things which your ladyship has often expressed the will to give me—I desired to produce something for you with my own hand, in order to be as little as possible unworthy of this kindness. I have now come to recognize that the grace of God is not to be bought, and that to keep it waiting is a

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

grievous sin. Therefore I acknowledge my error, and willingly accept your favours. When I possess them, not indeed because I shall have them in my house, but for that I myself shall dwell in them, the place will seem to encircle me with Paradise. For which felicity I shall remain evermore obliged to your ladyship than I am already, if that is possible. The bearer of this letter will be Urbino, who lives in my service. Your ladyship may inform him when you would like me to come and see the head you promised to show me."

The letter was accompanied by a sonnet, expressing the same diffidence.

"Seeking at least to be not all unfit
For thy sublime and boundless courtesy,
My lowly thoughts at first were fain to try
What they could yield for grace so infinite.
But now I know my unassisted wit
Is all too weak to make me soar so high,
For pardon, lady, for this fault I cry,
And wiser still I grow remembering it.
Yea, well I see what folly 'twere to think
That largess dropped from thee like dews from heaven
Could e'er be paid by work so frail as mine!
To nothingness my art and talent sink;
He fails who from his mortal stores hath given
A thousandfold to match one gift divine."

Michael Angelo's biographer, Condivi, speaks of two drawings made by his master for Vittoria, one a "Pieta" representing Christ being taken from the Cross by two angels in the presence of His mother, and one a Crucifixion. Both designs have been preserved, and the sketch by the latter, now at Oxford,

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

is supposed to be the original. It is of this that Michael Angelo writes in his other surviving letter :

“LADY MARCHIONESS :—

“Being myself in Rome, I thought it hardly fitting to give the crucified Christ to Messer Tommaso, and to make him an intermediary between your ladyship and me, your servant ; especially because it has been my earnest wish to perform more for you than for anyone I ever knew upon the world. But absorbing occupations, which still engage me, have prevented my informing your ladyship of this. Moreover, knowing that you know that love needs no taskmaster, and that he who loves doth not sleep, I thought the less of using go-betweens. And though I seem to have forgotten, I was doing what I did not talk about in order to effect a thing that was not looked for. My purpose has been spoiled : *He sins who faith like this so soon forgets.*”

Mr. Symonds prints in connection with this letter the following sonnet which may well have accompanied it :

“Blest spirit, who with loving tenderness
Quickenest my heart, so old and near to die,
Who 'mid thy joys on me dost bend an eye,
Though many nobler men around thee press !
As thou wert erewhile wont my sight to bless,
So to console my mind thou now dost fly ;
Hope therefore stills the pangs of memory,
Which, coupled with desire, my soul distress.
So finding in thee grace to plead for me—
Thy thoughts for me sunk in so sad a case—

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

He who now writes returns thee thanks for these.
Lo! it were foul and monstrous usury
To send thee ugliest paintings in the place
Of thy fair spirit's living phantasies."

The letters from Vittoria are in acknowledgment of the two sketches, and the first is probably an acknowledgment of the letter from Michael Angelo last quoted.

"Unique Master Michelangelo, and my most singular friend," it runs, "I have received your letter, and examined the crucifix, which truly hath crucified in my memory every other picture I ever saw. Nowhere could one find another figure of our Lord so well executed, so living, and so exquisitely finished. Certes, I cannot express in words how subtly and marvellously it is designed. Wherefore I am resolved to take the work as coming from no other hand but yours, and accordingly I beg you to assure me whether this really is yours or another's. Excuse the question. If it is yours, I must possess it under any conditions. In case it is not yours, and you want to have it carried out by your assistant, we will talk the matter over first. I know how extremely difficult it would be to copy it, and therefore I would rather let him finish something else than this. But if it be in fact yours, rest assured, and make the best of it, that it will never come again into your keeping. I have examined it minutely in full light and by the lens and mirror, and never saw anything more perfect.

"Yours to command,

"THE MARCHIONESS OF PESCARA."

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

The meaning, so tacitly conveyed, seems to be that Michael Angelo had merely sent his sketch for her approval, intending to have it executed by one of his workmen, but that Vittoria valued it too much to allow it again out of her hands, delicately hinting that no hand but the master's own could safely be entrusted to model it.

A second letter refers to the drawing of Christ upon the Cross supported by two angels :

“Your works forcibly stimulate the judgment of all who look at them. My study of them made me speak of adding goodness to things perfect in themselves, and I have seen now that ‘all is possible to him who believes.’ I had the greatest faith in God that He would bestow upon you supernatural grace for the making of this Christ. When I came to examine it, I found it so marvellous that it surpasses all my expectations. Wherefore, emboldened by your miracles, I conceived a great desire for that which I now see marvellously accomplished. I mean that the design is in all parts perfect and consummate, and one could not desire more, nor could desire attain to demanding so much. I tell you that I am mighty pleased that the angel on the right hand is by far the fairer, since Michael will place you, Michaelangelo, upon the right hand of our Lord at that last day. Meanwhile, I do not know how else to serve you than by making orisons to this sweet Christ, whom you have drawn so well and exquisitely, and praying you to hold me yours to command as yours in all and for all.”

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

From the following brief note it would appear that Michael Angelo had taken his friend's hint and set to work to model the crucifix :

"I beg you to let me have the crucifix a short while in my keeping, even though it be unfinished. I want to show it to some gentlemen who have come from the Most Reverend the Cardinal of Mantua. If you are not working, will you not come to-day at your leisure and talk with me ?

"Yours to command,

"THE MARCHIONESS OF PESCARA."

The one other letter of Vittoria that remains to us strikes a more personal note than the rest. It is evident that, during Vittoria's absence in Viterbo, Michael Angelo's letters had been enthusiastically frequent, and it is possible even that the gentle rebuke given here with such playful tact—revealing, as did Francisco's picture of her in the convent chapel, an attractive archness of humour among Vittoria's other qualities—was directed against a growing ardour of tone in her correspondent ; though this in a man past seventy is surely improbable. But here is the letter :

"MAGNIFICENT MESSER MICHELANGELO :—

"I did not reply earlier to your letter, because, it was, as one might say, an answer to my last : for I thought that if you and I were to go on writing without intermission according to my obligation

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

and your courtesy, I should have to neglect the Chapel of S. Catherine here, and be absent at the appointed hours for company with my sisterhood, while you would have to leave the Chapel of S. Paul, and be absent from morning through the day from your sweet usual colloquy with painted forms, the which with their natural accents do not speak to you less clearly than the living persons round me speak to me. Thus we should both of us fail in our duty, I to the brides, you to the vicar of Christ. For these reasons, inasmuch as I am well assured of our steadfast friendship and firm affection, bound by knots of Christian kindness, I do not think it necessary to obtain the proof of your good-will in letters by writing on my side, but rather to await with well-prepared mind some substantial occasion for serving you. Meanwhile I address my prayers to that Lord of whom you spoke to me with so fervent and humble a heart when I left Rome, that when I return thither I may find you with His image renewed and enlivened by true faith in your soul, in like measure as you have painted it with perfect art in my Samaritan. Believe me to remain always yours and your Urbino's."

Though, as has been said, Michael Angelo's age seems to preclude such warmth of feeling as, it is possible, Vittoria discourages in this letter, yet it must not be forgotten that age in a great artist is a very different thing, retains more essential youthfulness, than age in ordinary cases; for a lifelong preoccupation with beautiful forms and

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

ideal interests does unquestionably make for prolonged youth of the whole nature. Browning and Tennyson wrote love-poetry till the last, and we have not considered it strange in them; and "age," which was capable of expressing itself in the giant energy of a "Last Judgment" needs some other name. Therefore, the essential platonism of Michael Angelo's feeling for Vittoria may have exhibited in its expression a somewhat more than platonic fire, and there is one sonnet that might so be interpreted, a sonnet which, though it is not known to have been addressed to Vittoria, can hardly have been meant for anyone else :

"What though long waiting wins more happiness
Than petulant desire is wont to gain,
My luck in latest age hath brought me pain,
Thinking how brief must be an old man's bliss.
Heaven, if it heed our lives, can hardly bless
This fire of love when frosts are wont to reign :
For so I love thee, lady, and my strain
Of tears through age exceeds in tenderness.
Yet peradventure though my day is done,—
Though nearly past the setting 'mid thick cloud
And frozen exhalations sinks my sun,—
If love to only midday be allowed,
And I an old man in my evening burn,
You, lady, still my night to noon may turn."

In addition to the two sonnets quoted in connection with his letters, there are but two others which are known with certainty to have been addressed to Vittoria. The first has reference to

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

Vittoria's chastening influence over "the fierce heat" of his stormy passionate nature :

"When divine Art conceives a form and face,
She bids the craftsman for his first essay
To shape a simple model in mere clay :
This is the earliest birth of Art's embrace.
From the live marble in the second place
His mallet brings into the light of day
A thing so beautiful that who can say
When time shall conquer that immortal grace ?
Thus my own model I was born to be—
The model of that nobler self, whereto
Schooled by your pity, lady, I shall grow ;
Each overplus and each deficiency
You will make good. What penance then is due
For my fierce heat, chastened and taught by you ?"

The second

"He who is bound by some great benefit,
As to be raised from death to life again,
How shall he recompense that gift, or gain
Freedom from servitude so infinite ?
Yet if 'twere possible to pay the debt,
He'd lose that kindness which we entertain
For those who serve us well ; since it is plain
That kindness needs some boon to quicken it.
Wherefore, O lady, to maintain thy grace,
So far above my fortune, what I bring
Is rather thanklessness than courtesy :
For if both met as equals face to face,
She whom I love could not be called my king :—
There is no lordship in equality."

There remains one madrigal evidently written to Vittoria during her lifetime, in which, lamenting the vacillations of his soul in search of truth, "now to the right, now to the left hand driven," "both vice and virtue" making appeal to his

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

perplexed heart, he once more seeks her spiritual guidance :

“I send you paper, beg you take a quill,
And with your sacred ink
Make love give light, and mercy truth impart ;
So that my soul, delivered, purged of ill,
Shall not be drawn to error's brink,
Through life's brief remnant, by a blinded heart.”

Such is all that remains of the written intercourse of these two who were lovers in the high sense that both loved God and sought Him together, becoming mutually dear one to the other by fellowship in that thrilling quest. Vittoria was not far from the end of her pilgrimage when these lines were written, and her death in 1547, she being fifty-seven, and Michael Angelo seventy, seems to have plunged her forsaken friend in grief uncontrollable as it was deep. He appears to have been at her side at the last, and his disciple Condivi records that “he, for his part, loved her so, that I remember to have heard him say that he regretted nothing except that when he went to visit her upon the moment of her passage from this life, he did not kiss her forehead or her face, as he did kiss her hand. Her death was the cause that oftentimes he dwelt astonished, thinking of it, even as a man bereft of sense.” Michael Angelo himself, writing immediately after her death, says, “She felt the warmest affection for me, and I not less for her. Death has robbed me of a great friend.” Mr. Symonds has pointed out as curious that he here

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

uses the masculine gender : "*un grande amico*." His grief found expression also in sonnets and madrigals, in one of which he speaks of her as the sculptor of his soul, which by her death is thus left unfinished :

"When my rude hammer to the stubborn stone
Gives human shape, now that, now this, at will,
Following his hand who wields and guides it still,
It moves upon another's feet alone :
But that which dwells in heaven, the world doth fill
With beauty by pure motions of its own ;
And since tools fashion tools which else where none,
Its life makes all that lives with living skill.
Now, for that every stroke excels the more
The higher at the forge it doth ascend,
Her soul that fashioned mine hath sought the skies :
Wherefore unfinished I must meet my end,
If God, the great artificer, denies
That aid which was unique on earth before."

And again, in these forceful lines, he pays tribute to her regenerating power over his spirit :

"A man within a woman, nay, a god,
Speaks through her spoken word :
I therefore, who have heard,
Must suffer change, and shall be mine no more.
She lured me from the paths I whilom trod.
Borne from my former state by her away,
I stand aloof, and mine own self deplore.
Above all vain desire
The beauty of her face doth lift my clay ;
All lesser loveliness seems charnel mire.
O lady, who through fire
And water leadest souls to joys eterne,
Let me no more unto myself return."

Vittoria's life had ended under the shadow of a great sorrow, little less than the downfall of the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

great house of Colonna, which in its struggle with its papal rivals the Farnese found itself finally worsted. The castles of the Colonna were seized, and Vittoria, herself under the surveillance of the Holy Office, retired to the Benedictine Convent of St. Anne dei Funari (now Dei Falegnami), where she remained till her death.

Michael Angelo is supposed to have sketched her during these last sad years, and the portrait of her which survives, with the mark of his pupil Marcello Venusti upon it, is judged to have been merely coloured by that artist. Grimm, who says, "I believe none other but Michael Angelo could thus have represented Vittoria," gives this vivid description of the portrait: "We have before us an aged woman. There is no longer the fair hair, which once invested her with such charm: a white, widow's veil, brought low down upon her brow, envelops her head, and falls over her bosom and shoulders. A tall figure, dressed in black velvet, upright, and sitting without support on a chair, the circular, simply formed back of which is grasped in front by her right hand, while the other is lying on an open book in her lap. There is a grand repose in her features, a slightly painful compression about the eyes and mouth. She appears aged, but not decrepit; and the deep lines which fate had drawn are noble and energetic."

Michael Angelo was to survive his friend for twenty years, years in which he was still to produce

M. ANGELO AND VITTORIA COLONNA

some of his finest drawings; but, great as his artistic activity continued to be, his soul withdrew itself more and more into that life of religious contemplation in which, though separated from her in space and time, he must have felt himself growing ever nearer to his "comrade of the skies."

DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI AND
ELIZABETH SIDDAL

TO come near to a legend in the making, with the creative "wonder not yet quite gone" from the mythopœic process, to catch a glimpse of the very process by which an actual personal history becomes a universal symbol—that, in a peculiar degree, one is able to do in contemplating the love-story of Dante Gabriel Rossetti and Elizabeth Siddal. The famous lovers of old-time have so long been "enskied and sainted" in the high heaven of romance that, however authentic their earthly histories, it is difficult to conceive of their having actually lived and loved in the same human world as ourselves. They are too far off for us to think of them otherwise than as dream-figures in a dream-world ; and, though we know, for example, that in the very flesh Dante and Beatrice once gazed at each other in the streets of Florence, though we know the very year and day and street, yet no documents, no pious pilgrimage of Florence streets can make their story seem other than a dream. They are as real to us as Romeo and Juliet, but no more

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

real—realities of the imagination. Realities of the imagination also, by the power of their love and the magic of Rossetti's genius have these two of whom I have to write already become ; but, as yet, we are near enough to them to see them before they escape entirely into mythology ; to catch a glimpse, I repeat, of the process by which the mortal puts on immortality, the actual personal history becomes a universal symbol.

It seems not unlikely that the two mystical faces that look out most constantly from Rossetti's canvasses will haunt the imagination of mankind in the same manner as the classic faces of other painters immortally haunt it—the women of Leonardo, Botticelli, Gainsborough, Reynolds. Already such faces as “Beata Beatrix” and “Pandora” have long since become as the faces of legend ; and indeed, almost at their first revelation to the world, it had seemed impossible that they could be other than the faces of a dream, with such an atmosphere of glamour had the painter invested them, with such an intensity of spiritual impressiveness. Yet on one of these two wonderful faces the present writer has been privileged to look in the actual light of the common day, and many live still whose eyes have beheld the other, as Elizabeth Siddal was first made known to him, the history of whose genius came to be the history of her face.

I suppose that no moment or period of time, however poetic in the retrospect, has ever seemed

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

poetic at the moment; those who lived in it, particularly the young people, have, no doubt, been conscious only of its prose, and it has seemed impossible that anything romantic could be happening just then. The age of marvels is always past, or possibly to come—but never now. So it seems in 1911, and so, no doubt, it seemed in 1850, a year indeed which has been pilloried as the very culminating moment of mid-Victorian mediocrity and materialism. Yet the world has perhaps seldom had so many remarkable people in it at one time—so it seems to us now, looking back—and not since the Renaissance, perhaps, has there been a period so big with new creative forces, so rich in what one may call prophetic personalities.

One of the most potent of those prophetic personalities was surely Dante Gabriel Rossetti, then twenty-two, but already, four years since, the poet of "The Blessed Damosel," the most masterful of a little group of dreaming young painters, already knocking loudly at the academic doors in the name of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848, and busily at work in shattering to bits the smug scheme of things about them and remoulding it nearer to the heart's desire; daring architects of a magical new Palace of Art, and creators of such an Earthly Paradise of beauty and dream as had never before existed on English ground—a palace and a paradise that remain for us and for the future, and shall for ever give sanctuary and refreshment

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

to the human spirit. Beauty, always religious in its intensest manifestations, has never perhaps come to us as so veritably a religion as in the poetry and painting we call Pre-Raphaelite. These young poets and painters are priests as well, priests of a new religion of beauty, of which Keats was the lonely prophet, when, as a voice crying in the wilderness, he proclaimed the oneness of beauty and truth, and if Rossetti was the high priest of this religion, as beyond all question he was, Elizabeth Siddal was its young Madonna.

How strange it is to think that, if, some sixty-one years ago, one had stepped into a bonnet-shop in Cranborne Alley, Leicester Square, one could have seen this future Madonna, a grave, stately, beautiful girl, going about her daily tasks, busied among bonnets and bonnet-boxes, and, no doubt, with a certain disdain, which seems to have been characteristic of her, waiting on the humours of bourgeois customers who saw nothing in her but a milliner's assistant insufficiently humble. Fateful moment for Rossetti and the art of the future was that day in 1850 when one of these feminine customers stepped into the little shop, accompanied by one with an eye for beauty rather than bonnets, her handsome son, Walter Deverell, an enthusiastic young painter closely affiliated with the brotherhood, and on terms of cordial companionship with Rossetti. One can imagine the young man's enthusiasm at the discovery of this beautiful unknown face,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

there, as it were, in hiding in the purlieus of Leicester Square. We can see young Deverell imploring his mother to ask the proud girl if she would sit for her artist son, and one can imagine the eagerness with which, the permission given, he would hasten to rhapsodize with his fellow-painters on his fairy-tale discovery. Soon the beautiful face was to begin its romantic history as one of Shakespeare's dream-women, Viola, in Deverell's painting of "Viola listening to the Court Minstrels," in which picture Rossetti is one of her companions, as the jester. Then Holman Hunt was to paint her as Sylvia in "The Two Gentlemen of Verona," and again, another of the brotherhood, Millais, in still another Shakespearean character, his famous drowning Ophelia. But her face was to belong to none of these painters, for very soon Rossetti had claimed and won it for his own :

"Let all men note
That in all years (O Love, thy gift is this!)
They that would look on her must come to me."

So far, his sister Christina had been his model. It is her sorrow-dedicated face that looks out from "The Girlhood of Mary Virgin," and "The Annunciation," the two notable firstfruits of his art ; but, from now on, it is the face of Elizabeth Siddal that, for him,

"Like a governing star,
Gathers and garners from all things that are
Their silent penetrative loveliness."

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

It is her beauty, even when the face is the face of another model, that suffuses all his work, that beauty through which that high revelation had been made to him—"the worship of that Love through thee made known"—for which he strove ever after in picture and poem to find thrilling and hallowed and lovely expression.

As one stands hushed before the spiritual ecstasy of the "Beata Beatrix," or ponders the mystical passion of "The House of Life"—that chapel of beautiful words built by Rossetti to house the memory of his late "espoused saint"—does it not quicken one's sense of the spiritual values of human experience to recall in contrast that little bonnet-shop near Leicester Square and the beautiful milliner's assistant, so little aware of the romantic destiny already on its way to her, so little suspecting the transcendental meaning her beauty is one day to have for the whole world and the future days.

One naturally asks : How did that beauty affect other observers ? What was Elizabeth Siddal actually like, as seen in the every day, untransfigured by love or genius ? Rossetti's brother and biographer, William Michael, is at hand with this characteristically minute description of her. "She was," he says, "a most beautiful creature, with an air between dignity and sweetness, mixed with something which exceeded modest self-respect, and partook of disdainful reserve ; tall, finely formed, with a lofty neck, and regular yet somewhat

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

uncommon features, greenish-blue unsparkling eyes, large perfect eyelids, brilliant complexion, and a lavish heavy wealth of coppery-golden hair. It was what many people call red hair, and abuse under that name—but the colour, when not rank and flagrant, happens to have been always much admired by Dante Rossetti. 'Her voice was clear and low, but with a certain sibilant tendency which reduced its attractiveness. . . ."

This is a description of her at the time of Rossetti's first meeting her, when she was scarcely seventeen years old ; but I think that a description made by Lady Burne-Jones much later, when she had become Rossetti's wife, gives a more realizable, as certainly a very sympathetic, picture of her. The Burne-Joneses had been on a visit to the Rossettis at some lodgings in Hampstead.

"I see her," writes Lady Burne-Jones, "in the little upstairs bedroom, with its lattice window, to which she carried me when we arrived, and the mass of her beautiful deep-red hair as she took off her bonnet : she wore her hair very loosely fastened up, so that it fell in soft, heavy wings. Her complexion looked as if a rose tint lay beneath the white skin, producing a most soft and delicate pink for the darkest flesh-tones. Her eyes were of a kind of golden brown—agate colour is the only word I can think of to describe them—and wonderfully luminous : in all Gabriel's drawings of her, and in the type she created in his mind, this is to be seen. The

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

eyelids were deep, but without any languor or drowsiness, and had the peculiarity of seeming scarcely to veil the light in her eyes when she was looking down."

It will be observed that the two descriptions differ as to the colour of the eyes. "Greenish-blue unsparkling eyes," says her brother-in-law; "a kind of golden brown," says Lady Burne-Jones, adding, "agate colour," which is hardly the same thing, though it reinforces the "unsparkling" of the first description.

Rossetti himself, in one of the sonnets of "The House of Life," writes of: "Thine eyes gray-lit in shadowing hair above." Evidently, part of the beauty of the eyes he loved was their quality of enigmatic sea-like changefulness, as also that abstracted, impenetrable gaze which dominates her face in the portrait painted by herself. That portrait is declared by William Michael Rossetti to be "an absolute likeness," and, writing of it to Madox Brown in 1853, Dante Gabriel enthusiastically says: "Lizzie has made a perfect wonder of her portrait, which is nearly done, and which I think we shall send to the winter exhibition." From this it will be gathered that Miss Siddal possessed other natural gifts besides her beauty. Indeed, her gift for painting must have been very considerable, none the less so because it appears to have remained unrevealed till her chance introduction into that world of eager young artists, the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

atmosphere of which must have been charged with contagious aspiration. Naturally, Rossetti was her master, for such training as she had, as her work in some measure reflected his mood and manner, though it seems to have had no little personal force and quality, an ingenuity and grace of romantic invention in particular. "Her fecundity of invention," writes Rossetti, "and facility are quite wonderful—much greater than mine." "This," comments his brother, "may have been a lover's exaggeration, but it was not mere nonsense." Surely not, as it is easy to judge by looking at that portrait of herself, to be found reproduced in the Rossetti memoir. She was but twenty when she painted it, and to have achieved so much mastery in three years—during which Rossetti had been continually painting and drawing her with the ardent worship of a lover—indicates exceptional natural powers. Her favourite subjects were taken from romantic poetry, such as Wordsworth's "We are Seven," Browning's "Pippa Passes," Tennyson's "Eve of St. Agnes," the old ballad of "Sir Patrick Spens"; and, as we shall see presently, she had the further gift of a certain sad poetry herself.

One of the prettiest passages in Miss Siddal's short life is Ruskin's affectionate interest in her and her work. Rossetti had taken her to visit the Ruskin family one day in April, 1855, and thus writes to Madox Brown of the impression she had made.

"All the Ruskins were most delighted with

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

Guggum," he says—one likes to think of "Beata Beatrix" as "Guggum" too!—"John Ruskin said she was a noble, glorious creature, and his father said by her look and manner she might have been a countess." Ruskin had already some two or three years before launched his famous and most helpful manifesto in favour of the Pre-Raphaelites, and he had also made Rossetti's future particularly his care by generously undertaking to buy all the young painter's work that was to his taste, thus providing an art likely in its beginning to find little financial encouragement with a sustaining market. Now, evidently taking a fatherly interest in the love of the two young people, he proposed to buy Miss Siddal's work also, arranging to pay her an annual sum (a hundred and fifty pounds) and leaving her to produce her drawings at leisure. This arrangement lasted for two or three years, and seems only to have lapsed because Miss Siddal's frail health had not allowed her to work with any regularity. Yes! that complexion which "looked," as Lady Burne-Jones had said, as "if a rose tint lay beneath the white skin," was all too ominous of the physical fragility which too often lurks beneath such fairness. The shadow of consumption was over this beauty, and the fear of death became early the companion of love in Rossetti's heart. Very soon doctors and precautionary "changes of air," and actual illness, enter into the story, saddening even to despair Rossetti's letters to his family and friends; and this

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

sad poem, entitled "A Year and a Day," to which I referred above is painful evidence—in the almost physical weariness of the verses—how sick the writer felt herself to be :

"Slow days have passed that make a year,
Slow hours that make a day,
Since I could take my first dear love,
And kiss him the old way :
Yet the green leaves touch me on the cheek,
Dear Christ, this month of May.

"I lie among the tall green grass
That bends above my head,
And covers up my wasted face,
And folds me in its bed
Tenderly and lovingly
Like grass above the dead.

"Dim phantoms of an unknown ill
Float through my tiring brain ;
The unformed visions of my life
Pass by in ghostly train ;
Some pause to touch me on the cheek,
Some scatter tears like rain.

"The river ever running down
Between its grassy bed,
The voices of a thousand birds
That clang above my head,
Shall bring to me a sadder dream
When this sad dream is dead.

"A silence falls upon my heart,
And hushes all its pain.
I stretch my hands in the long grass,
And fall to sleep again,
There to lie empty of all love,
Like beaten corn of grain."

Poor girl ! one involuntarily exclaims—the poem is so expressively weighted with the helpless lassitude

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

of a life felt to be fading away, which it pictures with such pathetic simplicity and even detail. It was this precarious health, combined with the uncertainty of Rossetti's financial resources, that accounts for the strangely long-drawn lapse of time between the engagement of the two young people, within a few months after their meeting in 1850, and their marriage at last in 1860, ten years after. Yet this delay would, doubtless, press less hardly upon them than upon lovers in a more formal social environment; the world they belonged to was an artistic world favourable to a human freedom of intercourse, a little world, too, of friends all intimately associated in their work and dreams, a studio-restaurant life, paying little heed to conventions or domesticities, and thus we may think of those ten years as years of happy comradeship, of pursuits shared together, and work done side by side, with all the passionate zest, and sympathetic fusion, of young romantic lives. But illness, too, often marred this happy intercourse, and spells of it grew more frequent as the years went on, too often taking "Lizzie" away from London in search of more clement air. Too often the poet had to console himself with the philosophy of a "Parted Presence," and the haunting "Song of the Bower" is the poignant record of one of these separations more than usually prolonged:

"Say, is it day, is it dusk in thy bower,
Thou whom I long for, who longest for me?"

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

During these years Rossetti had been fitfully producing some of his most characteristic work, both in painting and poetry, and, though he employed other models as well, "Lizzie" was constantly his sitter. It is her face we find in the dream-wrought triptych of "Paolo and Francesca," as she is always the Beatrice in his numerous pictures from Dante—the earliest of which was the "Beatrice at a Marriage Feast denies Dante her Salutation." The very first picture in which she appears was a little water-colour, called "Rosso-vestita" (Redclad), made in the year of their meeting, and the last time Rossetti was to paint her, a few days before her death, was as the Princess Sabra in the water-colour of "St. George and the Dragon." "Ida" was one of Ruskin's names for her, and, in a letter congratulating them on their marriage, he thus testifies to what he considers her influence upon her husband's art. "I think," he writes, "Ida should be very happy to see how much more beautifully, perfectly, and tenderly you draw when you are drawing her than when you draw anybody else. She cures you of all your worst faults when you only look at her." Seldom, indeed, has a man's genius been so inspired and determined throughout by one passionate dream as that of Rossetti. In this he and his great master and namesake are spiritual brothers, for each it was the one first pure love of youth that, invisible as visible, whatever external incognities their lives may here

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

and there present, that made for them their vision of the world, and star-like, shone on them from beginning to end of their mystic pilgrimage. Rossetti's youth had been singularly pure. He had, we are told, "no juvenile amours, liaisons, or flirtations." Elizabeth Siddal was his first love—and from that fact comes surely that atmosphere of hushed wonder, that awe of virgin passion, that sense of trance-like rapture and worship, that breathes through all his work, picture or poem, a quality to be found elsewhere in literature in but one book—that "*Vita Nuova*," his translation of which was, for the most part, one of the masterly achievements of his marvellous boyhood.

After ten years of a love thus vitally sacramental and a comradeship so complete, their formal marriage seems a comparatively minor detail; but it took place at last on May 23, 1860, at St. Clement's Church, Hastings, whither "Lizzie," with her lover as companion and nurse, had gone for the sea air. Till the last moment it had looked as if it must still be deferred. So miserable was his sweetheart's health that Rossetti had feared that she might not be able "to enter the cold church with safety." In a letter to his mother, he seems to reproach himself for the long anterior delay: "Like all the important things I ever meant to do—to fulfil duty or secure happiness—this one has been deferred almost beyond possibility. I have hardly deserved that "Lizzie" should still consent to it, but she has

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

done so, and I trust I may still have time to prove my thankfulness to her."

In this the meaning of the last verse of "The Song of the Bower" :

" Shall I not one day remember thy bower,
One day when all days are one day to me?—
Thinking, 'I stirred not, and yet had the power,'
Yearning, 'Ah God, if again it might be!'"

But it is the truest love that is apt, on occasion, to be thus self-reproachful, and at all events "the hour for which the years did sigh" had come at last. Paris had previously proved favourable to his wife's health, so it was thither they set off to spend their honeymoon. "Lizzie's" health did actually improve and the holiday passed happily in visiting galleries and looking up old friends. Rossetti also did some work, turning again to an old fancy of his, and completing the strangely fascinating little drawing, "How They Met Themselves." In this drawing, it will be remembered, two lovers walking together in a dark wood are represented as meeting face to face their wraiths similarly walking together. A ghostly light surrounds the phantom forms, and the living woman is represented as swooning at her lover's side. Certainly this was an uncanny, ill-omened theme to treat at such a time, with the shadow of "Lizzie's" illness still over them, and no little superstitious as Rossetti is said to have been. But it was the kind of fancy they both delighted in, and the newly made wife seems to have had no

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

misgivings as to being the model. The swooning girl is said by Mr. W. M. Rossetti to be "very like her." One is reminded of Rossetti's treatment of a similar theme in a water-colour called "Bonifazio's Mistress," which represents a girl dying while sitting for her portrait to her lover—the proposed ending of his unfinished story, "St. Agnes of Intercession." To have been thus regardless of omens, one may conclude that the lovers were feeling very secure in their new happiness, and that Paris had put Rossetti's fears for his wife's health momentarily at rest. She was but scarcely twenty-seven, he thirty-two. Life may well have seemed fair and full of romantic promise as they returned to London, and took it up together in their pleasant studio in Chatham Place, near Blackfriars Bridge, with the motley river traffic of the Thames for picturesque outlook at their window.

"A little while a little love

The hour yet bears for thee and me. . . ."

When Rossetti wrote that I do not know—it stands next to "The Song of the Bower" in his poems—but he may well have gone with its valedictory refrain singing in his heart during the months that followed; for love's hours were all too surely numbered. His wife's spurt of renewed health was not long maintained, and now to her phthisical weakness was added a wearing neuralgia which necessitated recourse to laudanum for its relief. Her constant sickness was the more cruel,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

for the life of their little circle was daily growing fuller in interest and success. In 1861 Rossetti's translations from "The Early Italian Poets" was published and the epoch-making decorative firm of "Morris Marshall, Falkner & Co." was inaugurated. They were stirring days for the four friendly households, the Burne-Joneses, the Morrises, the Madox Browns, and the Rossettis; and Swinburne, one of their nearest friends, was in the first splendid spring of his powers. It must have been hard to have been ill with such a creative ferment about one; and to this constant suffering was to be added the sharp sorrow, a year after their marriage, of a still-born child. From this blow and its attendant illness the failing wife seems to have rapidly recovered, but the neuralgia remained, and the laudanum bottle. Rossetti had been led by Ruskin to take an interest in a certain Working Men's College, and there occasionally he still conducted a drawing class. On the evening of February 10, 1862, he was due at one of these classes, but before going there, he had taken his wife to dine in company with Swinburne at the Sablonière Hotel in Leicester Square—that little bonnet-shop of sacred memory, it may be recalled, this night of all nights, not far away! After dinner, during which "Lizzie" had been bright and animated, Rossetti had taken her home, and gone on to his drawing class. He returned shortly after eleven to find his wife insensible, and at her bedside an empty

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

laudanum bottle. Four doctors did all there was to be done, but in vain, and at twenty minutes past seven the following morning she died.

Realizing what a tragic significance that moment of Elizabeth Rossetti's death was to have for future time, it is strange to read the contemporary newspaper account of it as given in Mr. W. M. Rossetti's memoir. It is evident that Rossetti's was still an unknown name to the public at large. Little did the reporter realize what sacred, historical material he was dealing with when, as part of his day's work, he thus wrote of the "Death of a Lady from an Overdose of Laudanum": "On Thursday Dr. Payne held an inquest at Bridewell Hospital on the body of Eliza Eleanor Rossetti, aged twenty-nine, wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Artist, of No. 14 Chatham Place, Blackfriars, who came to her death under very melancholy circumstances. Mr. Rossetti stated that on Monday afternoon, between six and seven o'clock, he and his wife went out in the carriage for the purpose of dining with a friend at the Sablonière Hotel, Leicester Square, when they had got about half-way there his wife appeared to be very drowsy, and he wished her to return. She objected to their doing so, and they proceeded to the hotel, and dined there. They returned home at eight o'clock, when she appeared somewhat excited. He left home again at nine o'clock, his wife being then about to go to bed. On his return at half-past eleven o'clock he found his wife in bed,

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

laudanum bottle. Four doctors did all there was to be done, but in vain, and at twenty minutes past seven the following morning she died.

Realizing what a tragic significance that moment of Elizabeth Rossetti's death was to have for future time, it is strange to read the contemporary newspaper account of it as given in Mr. W. M. Rossetti's memoir. It is evident that Rossetti's was still an unknown name to the public at large. Little did the reporter realize what sacred, historical material he was dealing with when, as part of his day's work, he thus wrote of the "Death of a Lady from an Overdose of Laudanum": "On Thursday Dr. Payne held an inquest at Bridewell Hospital on the body of Eliza Eleanor Rossetti, aged twenty-nine, wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Artist, of No. 14 Chatham Place, Blackfriars, who came to her death under very melancholy circumstances. Mr. Rossetti stated that on Monday afternoon, between six and seven o'clock, he and his wife went out in the carriage for the purpose of dining with a friend at the Sablonière Hotel, Leicester Square, when they had got about half-way there his wife appeared to be very drowsy, and he wished her to return. She objected to their doing so, and they proceeded to the hotel, and dined there. They returned home at eight o'clock, when she appeared somewhat excited. He left home again at nine o'clock, his wife being then about to go to bed. On his return at half-past eleven o'clock he found his wife in bed,

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

utterly unconscious. She was in the habit of taking laudanum, and he had known her to take as much as 100 drops at a time, and he thought she had been taking it before they went out. He found a phial on a table at the bedside, which had contained laudanum, but it was then empty. A doctor was sent for, and promptly attended. She had expressed no wish to die, but quite the reverse. Indeed she contemplated going out of town in a day or two, and had ordered a new mantle which she intended wearing on the occasion. He believed she took the laudanum to soothe her nerves. She could not sleep or take food unless she used it. Dr. Hutchinson, of Bridge Street, Blackfriars, said he had attended the deceased in her confinement in April with a still-born child. He saw her on Monday night at half-past eleven o'clock, and found her in a comatose state. He tried to rouse her, but could not, and then tried the stomach-pump without avail. He injected several quarts of water into the stomach, and washed it out, when the smell of laudanum was very distinct. He and three other medical gentlemen stayed with her all night, and she died at twenty minutes past seven o'clock on Tuesday morning. The jury returned a verdict of Accidental Death."

The ever-helpful Ford Madox Brown had come to his friend's side on that dark morning, and William Michael Rossetti had touchingly written in his diary :

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

“The poor thing looks wonderfully calm now and beautiful.”

“Ed avea in se umilita si verace
Che pareva che dicesse, Jo sono in pace.”
(And with her was such very humbleness
That she appeared to say, I am at peace).

“I could not but think of that all the time I looked at her, it is so exactly like.”

As his wife lay thus at peace, Rossetti's grief prompted an act of singular elegiac loveliness, romantically impressive with the solemn poetry of death. Between her cheek and her beautiful hair he laid the manuscript volume of his poems, the only copy of them in the world. The loveliest had been written for her. They had no meaning but their love, and now they had no life for him apart from her. They belonged immortally to her—the last most precious gift he could bring. It was fitting that she should take them with her, that his heart should thus lie beside her in the grave. What had he to do with poetry any more!

Was there ever a scene more thrilling to the imagination, with the mysterious glamour, the terrible star-like music of death? Only, it would seem, when love and death thus meet together in the death-chamber of a poet's heart do we know the tragic meaning of the strange word Life. There is no recorded act of love more symbolic of the very heart of love than this gift of Rossetti's to his dead wife—a gift in later years only seemingly taken

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

back, and actually, so to say, but momentarily borrowed, to the end that he might further enrich it, make it the more immortally hers.

A touch of self-reproach may seem to have entered into this sacrifice. "I have often," he said to Madox Brown, "been writing at those poems when Lizzie was ill and suffering, and I might have been attending to her, and now they shall go." But deep grief is ever thus self-reproachful. There always seems something undone that we might have done for the dead we love. It is the deepest love that is ever thus retrospectively scrupulous and self-torturing, and it would be unjust to Rossetti to allow too much weight to such words spoken in such an hour. No human love is quite perfect, and in its own heart-love the most pure and devoted will always be conscious of shortcoming in this and that. It is by the whole history of a feeling that it must be judged, not by a small failure here and there; and so judged, who can study Rossetti's paintings and poems without realizing that his love for Elizabeth Siddal was, not only the one passion, but the enduring religion of his life, a religion which gives his work an unusual sacramental significance, the importance of a spiritual message :

"Yea, in God's name, and Love's, and thine would I
Draw from one loving heart such evidence
As to all hearts all things shall signify. . . ."

These lines were certainly among the poems that lay between her hair and her cheek, that sad

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

morning ; and, though she had left him thus early to continue the rest of his journey alone, all his subsequent work was to be the fulfilment of this youthful ideal : “ and to this end,” he might have said, with Dante at the bier of Beatrice, “ is all my striving, as she well knoweth.”

Three other lines from that same sonnet must have come home to him with terrible truth, as he stood hushed at the side of her marble peace :

“ Lady, I fain would tell how evermore
Thy soul I know not from thy body, nor
Thee from myself, neither our love from God.”

There, rightly understood, is the mystical message of all his work, the apprehension of visible beauty as the key to, the “ signature ” of, the invisible, the transfiguration of the senses by the soul, “ the meaning of all things that are ” revealed in one beautiful, beloved face, and in the love of one fair fleeting form the divination of the celestial love without beginning and without end.

For us here it is not necessary to pursue the story of Rossetti’s after-life, sick and haunted as in later years it was to become—

“ A thicket hung with masks of mockery
And watered with the wasteful warmth of tears ; ”

and yet, for all its “ soul-struck widowhood,” so starred with momentous and enduring achievement. Our concern has been with that human love-story, which, from now on, could only be continued in the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

poet's soul, with the successive creations of his genius for its subsequent history ; that history told in masterpieces of poem or painting, in "The House of Life," in "Dante's Dream," in which Rossetti immortalized and universalized that hour of his wife's loss in one superb symbol of tragic sorrow, that picture so strangely charged with the enchanted hush, the dark magnificence, and the regal beauty of death ; in "Beata Beatrix," where we see the other side of the bitterness of death, and enter with the parting soul that spiritual ecstasy of rebirth into another plane of being which is one conception of our mortal change. It is said that in painting "Beata Beatrix" Rossetti allowed himself to recall his wife's face for the first time after her death, and of it he himself has said that it is "not intended at all to represent death, but to render it under the resemblance of a trance in which . . . she is suddenly rapt from earth to heaven."

When Rossetti painted this, the inevitable processes of grief had brought him to that more peaceful mood in which he could conceive of death, the infant child Life had brought him, as "full-grown the helpful daughter of my heart," and lay his hand in hers not without hope that she was leading him through "the devious coverts of dismay," and the dolorous paths of "Willowwood," back to the lost face and the one dream :

"When vain desire at last and vain regret
Go hand in hand to death, and all is vain,

DANTE G. ROSSETTI AND E. SIDDAL

What shall assuage the unforgotten pain
And teach the unforgetful to forget ?
Shall Peace be still a sunk stream long unmet—
Or may the soul at once in a green plain
Stoop through the spray of some sweet life-fountain
And cull the dew-drenched flowering amulet ?

“ Ah ! when the wan soul in that golden air
Between the scripted petals softly blown
Peers breathless for the gift of grace unknown—
Ah ! let none other alien spell soe'er
But only the one Hope's one name be there—
Not less nor more, but even that word alone.”

MARY STUART AND PIERRE CHASTELARD

THEIR far-reaching political consequences have given a prominence to two of Queen Mary's love-affairs out of proportion to their genuine romantic qualities. Rizzio and the blood-stained floor at Holyrood, Bothwell and the Casket Letters, have occupied our imaginations in the forefront of the story to the semi-oblivion of other names more truly deserving the tragic laurel which was Mary's one invariable gift to her lovers; the names of men who loved her with no *arrière-pensée* of selfish ambition, men whose eyes were less on her crown than on her fair, disastrous face, glorious madmen who loved that face as men loved the moon, fated servitors of *la belle dame sans merci*.

Modern historical criticism has sadly tarnished the Rizzio and Bothwell legends. Nowadays we think less of the decorative Italian artist and his chamber music, and more of the rather elderly, somewhat fattish, Italian secretary, deep in political intrigue and perilous foreign correspondence, objectionably familiar in manner with his royal mistress, and exasperatingly upstart in his general

4121
MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

ways. We have rather ceased, I think, to blame Darnley for his murder, and began to wonder that he was let live so long. As to Bothwell, seeing so clearly the cold, self-seeking, and brutal commonness of the man, we have lost all patience with Mary for wrecking her fortunes on so coarse a bully, and her disordered infatuation seems to belong less to poetry than to disagreeable pathology. Rizzio and Bothwell are only romantic by position, by their relation to the dramatic disposition of events, and by association with the romantic personality of Mary, as vulgar objects grow poetic in the moonlight. Those other wearers of Mary's tragic laurel, however, are essentially romantic, by the fire and the purity of their devotion, as well.

Such was that young Lord John Gordon who was to be the first, literally, to lose his head over Mary, soon after her arrival in Scotland. There were many to say that she had smiled over kindly on the handsome youth, with such potent magic indeed that, when she had committed him to Edinburgh Castle, for his truculent swordsmanship in the city streets, he had not only broken his word, but dared to gather his clansmen about him and plan her abduction. For this he was to mount the scaffold, and Mary, not without tears, but without mercy, was to see him die. With the dream still in his eyes, he called to her, before the axe fell : " Most lovely, but most cruel of her sex ! "

Happier than he, perhaps the happiest of all

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Mary's minor lovers, was young George Douglas, the gallant lad of eighteen, who managed her escape from Lochleven Castle. Him she had even expressed a wish to marry. She had said so frankly to Murray, the Regent, on one of his visits to his precarious prisoner, young George being the Regent's brother, and at that time an inmate of the castle, his mother Lady Douglas and another brother, Sir William Douglas, being the Queen's gaolers. The immediate result of Mary's frankness was to banish George Douglas from the castle; only, however, that he should the more actively plan Mary's escape. A few weeks later it was his loving arms that carried his Queen ashore from the darkling boat, and set her on his waiting horse—proud and happy George Douglas, riding by her side through the rushing night. Nearly twenty years later another gallant moth was to hurl himself into the magic dazzle, young English Anthony Babington, who was found ready to murder his Queen for Mary's sake, and so passes in his dream to Tower Hill. And to these might be added other names, humbler lovers still, who had been eager to dare all and lose all for a smile from those strange eyes, a touch of that too thoughtlessly caressing hand. Ah! those soft, bird-like ways of hers, those artless arts of casual tenderness so easy to mistake, that made all her slaves, and drove some mad.

“I know how folk would gibe
If one of us pushed courtesy so far,”

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

says one of her four "Maries," in Swinburne's honeyed play, striving to tell where lay her mistress's all-conquering charm :

"She has always loved love's fashions well ; you wot,
The marshal, head friend of this Chastelard's,
She used to talk with ere he brought her here
And sow their talk with little kisses thick
As roses in rose-harvest. For myself,
I cannot see which side of her that lurks
Which snares in such wise all the sense of men ;
What special beauty, subtle as man's eye
And tender as the inside of the eyelid is,
There grows about her."

So Mary Hamilton, but Mary Carmichael deems it is her way of talking :

"I think her cunning speech—
The soft and rapid shudder of her breath
In talking—the rare tender little laugh—
The pitiful sweet sound like a bird's sigh
When her voice breaks ; her talking does it all."

But Mary Seyton will have the charm is in her eyes :

"I say, her eyes with those clear perfect brows :
It is the playing of those eyelashes,
The lure of amorous looks as sad as love,
Plucks all souls toward her like a net."

So a poet strives to formulate a fascination which Mary's portraits only hint at, but fall short of conveying ; a gift of personal enchantment to which even her enemies bore witness, but which, while all could praise, none could with exactness analyse. After naming this feature and that

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

polysyllabic literary Billingsgate which Swinburne employed in a very ecstasy of vituperative mud-throwing to characterize the unimaginable silliness of Ireland's production. Merely as a literary curiosity, one may quote a typical passage—the highfalutin of a “man of feeling” in 1805. Chatelar, so called, is represented as having stolen Mary's rosary. These are his sublime raptures over his treasure :

“This rosary was the theft of love—surely 'tis forgiven. I stole the secret moment, and in the absence of my love, I made myself possessor of these beads unseen. Heavenly powers ! they were Mary's, her ivory fingers with love-thrilling touch, have pressed these little amber studs ! her lips ! love, love, omniscient love ! her lips too have kissed them ! Come, come to mine—thus—and thus—and thus I scent their fragrance, and I suck their sweets ! Oh ! balmy essence ! nectareous juice ! tinged with the vermeil dye of those moist rubies, which, moving, utter dulcet music, and dispense around the violet's rich perfume. O mouth more exquisite than fragrant May ! more luscious than the honey bee's rich store ! Thus, thus, I taste thee ! ”

Even Mr. Maurice Hewlett, friendly by nature to euphuistic forms of gallantry, declines the opportunity, in his brilliant “The Queen's Quair,” to give poor Chastelard a chance with posterity ;

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

characteristic, the last secret still escapes them ; as perhaps it always does in the beauty that has done the most divine damage in the world—for the essence of a spell is its mystery, and wizardry knows no why or wherefore. Plain miracle is alike the only explanation of a rose, or of a “tragic Mary” ; and plain madness is perhaps the most logical worship of such beauty. Divine beauty, divine madness, divine death ! Such, at all events, would seem to have been the desperate logic of that other quite unpolitic lover of the Queen, Pierre de Boscobel de Chastelard, gentleman of Dauphiné, descendant of Bayard, and poet of the *Pléiade*.

Outside Mr. Swinburne’s noble tragedy, Chastelard’s divine madness—his really fine frenzy—has not, it seems to me, received its fair due at the hands of romance, not to speak of history. History, indeed, has treated Chastelard as a crazy fribble, much in the spirit of Hamlet’s manner towards Osric : “Dost know this water-fly ?”—and romance has seemed scarcely aware of his existence. The egregious S. W. H. Ireland, of the famous “Ireland forgeries,” attempted in Chastelard’s name one more mystification of the guileless public of 1805, with a nauseous confection entitled “Effusions of Love from Chatelar to Mary Queen of Scotland—Translated from a Gallic manuscript in the Scotch College at Paris. Interspersed with songs, sonnets and notes explanatory—by the Translator.” One would need the command of that explosively

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

polysyllabic literary Billingsgate which Swinburne employed in a very ecstasy of vituperative mud-throwing to characterize the unimaginable silliness of Ireland's production. Merely as a literary curiosity, one may quote a typical passage—the highfalutin of a “man of feeling” in 1805. Chatelar, so called, is represented as having stolen Mary's rosary. These are his sublime raptures over his treasure :

“This rosary was the theft of love—surely 'tis forgiven. I stole the secret moment, and in the absence of my love, I made myself possessor of these beads unseen. Heavenly powers ! they were Mary's, her ivory fingers with love-thrilling touch, have pressed these little amber studs ! her lips ! love, love, omniscient love ! her lips too have kissed them ! Come, come to mine—thus—and thus—and thus I scent their fragrance, and I suck their sweets ! Oh ! balmy essence ! nectareous juice ! tinged with the vermeil dye of those moist rubies, which, moving, utter dulcet music, and dispense around the violet's rich perfume. O mouth more exquisite than fragrant May ! more luscious than the honey bee's rich store ! Thus, thus, I taste thee !”

Even Mr. Maurice Hewlett, friendly by nature to euphuistic forms of gallantry, declines the opportunity, in his brilliant “The Queen's Quair,” to give poor Chastelard a chance with posterity ;

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

though he admits that he died like a gentleman, which, after all, is an epitaph worth dying for. A glittering gentleman of France, the perfection, possibly the exaggeration, of the sworded butterfly type characteristic of the Renaissance, Chastelard undoubtedly was; one whose fine clothes and posturing elegancies of speech and manners, all the satin and sugar and general high-flown dandyism of him, masked the genuine virility and strength of soul not infrequently to be found beneath such externals in those days; when life, so stern at core, went so often in such fantastic masquerade. Surely to those sour Scotch eyes that so grimly watched the landing of all those "French popinjays," that heart-sick, misty morning of Mary's first arrival at Leith, he may well have seemed the very personification of those "Babylonian" iniquities so unpleasing to the godly Mr. Knox, the very prince of that papistical company of "skippers and danciers and dalliers with dames."

Let us pause a moment to indulge our modern sympathy—a sympathy which history has insufficiently bestowed—with that shivering chapfallen company of exquisites newly come from singing France over the weary sea, so laughably out of place, so absurdly misunderstood, in this land of inhospitable rock and dripping mist, prison-like houses, funereal costumes, rawbones, sour faces, and harsh, outlandish speech. Well might the little Queen cry herself to sleep, looking her last—her

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

literal last, poor Mary—on laughing France: “Farewell, beloved France, I shall never, never see you more!” as movingly described by Brantôme, who was one of the many illustrious French “dancing-masters”—otherwise the fine flower of the chivalry and culture of France—that formed Mary’s brilliant suite. No less than three of her uncles of the redoubtable house of Guise, the Duc d’Aumale, the Marquis d’Elbœuf, and the Grand Prior, were of this company, preposterously regarded by these supercilious hyperborean saints as though they were a troupe of strolling players, not to speak of some six score noble French gentlemen, amongst them the chief ornaments of the Court of the Louvre; and that “garden of girls,” the four Maries, her immortal maids of honour.

To our eyes that little fleet riding at anchor in the fog and drizzle of Leith harbour, with its strange foreign sailors and its gay-garmented courtly folk, trying to keep up their spirits with half-frightened laughter—a snatch of flowery song and a touched lute, maybe, here and there, to deepen the disapproving gaze of Scotch fishwives and glooming zealots—seems a veritable argosy of romance; so much of vivid, forceful, fated personality lay packed between its decks, so much brilliant human story, so much of the beautiful tragic stuff of life; strong men, fair faces, fluttering hearts, and plotting and dreaming brains. One likes to think, too, of the priests with

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

their sacred vessels—be sure the grim folk ashore thought of little but that! Mr. Knox's "idol of the mass"—the musicians with their delicate old-world instruments, their lutes and viols, their "citherns and citoles"; and a specially precious charge is in the keeping of grave Servais de Condé—no less than the library of the learned young Queen. That library itself was to have a romantic history, probably the first library of any account, and surely of *belles-lettres*, ever housed in Scotland. An uncouth catalogue made by no sympathetic hand, years after, when Mary had fled to England, still exists and has been piously edited and annotated by a modern bibliophile.

It was a delightfully varied collection, concentrating every form of "sweet learning" dear to the Renaissance. Though "the Decameron of Bocas" was there, and many a quaint Arthurian romance, "The First Buik of Amades of Gaule," "Two Volumes of Lancilot de Laik," "The First Buik of Rolland Amoreuse," and so forth; and though the "gay science" of the fashionable Ronsardist poetry is well represented, Pontus de Tyard with his "Errores Amoreuses," Du Bellay, and the master Ronsard himself—her own familiar friend—with an "Art Poetik in French"—the library was by no means a frivolous one. "Vergilius" was there, and "The First Volume of Heros," likewise "Herodote," "The Symposie of Plato," and Marcus Aurelius in Italian;

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

and there were weighty theological treatises which the Scotch cataloguer must have taken up with a pair of tongs, such as "Ane Treatie of the Prémicie of the Peap," and "The Answer of Johnne Calvynis Epistle," together with one volume which, doubtless, he approved, a translation of the Psalms, by her Latin Master—George Buchanan. Books of hunting, the game of chess, and "Thre Buikis of Musik" (perhaps Rizzio's) are found side by side with Saint Augustine, and lives of the saints. And there is one book absurdly catalogued as "Frenche Sonnattis in Writt," which may well have been a manuscript volume of Chastelard's own poems. Such were the volumes that M. Servais de Condé had in keeping between decks, in fair bindings—Mary had probably caught a taste for fine bindings from Diane de Poitiers—blazoned with her arms and those of her dead boy-King Francis, for whom her tears were scarcely yet dried, and whom she had mourned in pretty pathetic verses of her own :

" Si en quelque séjour,
Soit en bois ou en prée,
Soit sur l'aube du jour,
Ou soit sur la vesprée,
Sans cesse mon cœur sent
Le regret d'un absent."

Brantôme tells us that during the voyage the gallant Chastelard had not feared to rally the Queen on her obstinate widowhood, and had written her a sonnet "*très bien fait*" in Italian, beginning "*Che*

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

giova posseder città e regni,” of which the substance was : “ Of what use is it to possess widespreading domains, cities, crowns and bowing people, to be admired, respected, feared and gazed at, and yet sleep alone in glacial widowhood ? ” Brantôme evidently thought no little of Chastelard as a poet. “ He made many other very beautiful rhymes,” he says, “ which I have read in his own handwriting, but they have never been printed, so far as I have seen.”

He adds that the Queen, “ who loved letters, and particularly rhymes, and sometimes made pretty ones herself,” was much pleased with Chastelard’s poetry, and even wrote back verses in reply, generally “ making him good cheer and entertaining him.” Brantôme has this further praise of Chastelard. “ Chastelard,” he says, “ was a knight of polished manners, as good a swordsman as he was good at letters. He was very adroit with arms, and was expert in all manly sports and exercises, such as fencing, tennis, jumping and dancing. In short, he was a very accomplished gentleman ; and in spirit he was no less charming, he talked well, and wrote even better, and as well even in rhyme as any gentleman of France, making very sweet and graceful poetry with ease.”

Chastelard’s wit and gay spirits had evidently been very welcome to Mary on that voyage dolorous, to the customary hardships of which had been added the fear of capture by Elizabeth’s warships, .

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

and Brantôme records one high-flown conceit of his—" *ce gentil mot* "—much, one can imagine, in his usual dandiacal manner. As, one evening, the sailors were lighting the ship's lanterns, the voice of Chastelard was heard declaring that there was no need of lantern or torch to light up the sea, for the beautiful eyes of the Queen were bright enough to illuminate, with their lovely fires, the wide waters, and gave all the light he needed to see by.

There were other poets aboard to say similar pretty things to the Queen—Chastelard's own patron, M. d'Amville, of the great house of Montmorenci, for one—and then we hear, too, of five "violars" to make music. So, doubtless, these poor French butterflies contrived to keep up a certain gaiety on the voyage, and the fog was interpreted into a providence as hiding them from the sea-dogs of Elizabeth. How Knox interpreted that fog it is interesting to recall. "The very face of the heavens," he says, "the time of her arrival, did manifestly speak what comfort was brought unto this country with her, to wit, sorrow, darkness, dolour, and all impiety; for, in the memory of man, that day of the year, was never seen a more dolorous face of the heaven than was at her arrival, which two days after did so continue. . . . That fore-warning gave God unto us, but, alas, the most part were blind." So did the genial John read the celestial signs, and such in the main was the mood of welcome awaiting Mary, and her "dames, damoisellis, and

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

maidinnis"; though it is recorded that a certain human element in the sermon-ridden population did its poor best to provide a serenade for the Queen beneath her palace windows. The graceful arts, however, might well be a little rusty in a city where a poor rascal had recently been hanged for "making a Robin Hood" (a sort of merry-England carnival mummary), and though John Knox speaks highly of the entertainment—"a company," he says, "of most honest men with instruments of music, and with musicians, gave salutations at her chamber window"—Mary and her courtiers seem to have held their ears. "There came under her window," writes Brantôme, "five or six hundred ragamuffins of that town, who gave her a concert of the vilest fiddles and little rebecs, which are as bad as they can be in that country, and accompanied them with singing of psalms, but so wretchedly out of tune that nothing could be worse. Ah! what melody it was! What a lullaby for the night!"

Mary, however, accepted the good intentions, and professed herself pleased; and, poor soul, the crudest attempt at anything so human as music may well have been grateful to her in a people who, she was soon to find, were dourly on the watch to misinterpret the most innocent gaiety as "French" depravity. Alas for the "*joyeuseté*," in which, she wailed, she had been brought up; "so termed she," Knox sourly explains, "her dancing, and other things thereto belonging."

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

maidinnis"; though it is recorded that a certain human⁵⁷ element in the sermon-ridden population did its poor best to provide a serenade for the Queen beneath her palace windows. The graceful arts, however, might well be a little rusty in a city where a poor rascal had recently been hanged for "making a Robin Hood" (a sort of merry-England carnival mummary), and though John Knox speaks highly of the entertainment—"a company," he says, "of most honest men with instruments of music, and with musicians, gave salutations at her chamber window"—Mary and her courtiers seem to have held their ears. "There came under her window," writes Brantôme, "five or six hundred ragamuffins of that town, who gave her a concert of the vilest fiddles and little rebecs, which are as bad as they can be in that country, and accompanied them with singing of psalms, but so wretchedly out of tune that nothing could be worse. Ah! what melody it was! What a lullaby for the night!"

Mary, however, accepted the good intentions, and professed herself pleased; and, poor soul, the crudest attempt at anything so human as music may well have been grateful to her in a people who, she was soon to find, were dourly on the watch to misinterpret the most innocent gaiety as "French" depravity. Alas for the "*joyeuseté*," in which, she wailed, she had been brought up; "so termed she," Knox sourly explains, "her dancing, and other things thereto belonging."

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

There was, however, a wistful section of society in kirk-ridden Edinburgh to whom Mary's advent must have come like a burst of sunshine, youthful lords and ladies to whom the Queen's "French fillokes and fiddlers" were anything but anathema; and one can imagine that the sojourn of Mary's little French Court at Holyrood, with its consequent round of festivities, was an oasis of natural joy in their bleak sermon-charged atmosphere. Strange, that such found more fun "in fiddling and flinging than in reading or hearing of God's most blessed word; and fiddlers and flatterers more precious in their eyes than men of wisdom and gravity." Youthful levity incomprehensible to Knox and other "sober men," whose "wholesome admonition" young Edinburgh, oddly enough, found far less attractive.

In the centre of this godless gaiety, one of the most brilliant figures was our Chastelard, whose gifts and graces had evidently by this time, from the report of various witnesses, made him somewhat too conspicuously *persona grata* with the heedlessly demonstrative Queen. Mary's indiscreet complaisance seems to have turned the head of the inflammable poet, who henceforth made no secret of his passion for the Queen. No doubt she discounted his raptures as the euphuistic exaggeration which poets were privileged to employ towards noble ladies at that period, but Chastelard was to prove them all too tragically, however idiotically, sincere.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

When the time came for the French visitors to return home, Chastelard, with lyrical reluctance, accompanied his patron, the Maréchal d'Amville; but, before very long, he had found an excuse to be back in Scotland once more. His family were Huguenot, but he had been brought up by the Montmorencis, and, a religious war breaking out at this time, Chastelard escaped from the dilemma of having to choose sides between his co-religionists and his patrons, by gaining permission for this timely absence in Scotland. Meanwhile, he had not ceased to proclaim his hopeless love for the Queen in open talk as well as sugared sonnets, and, as he passed through London on his way north, he was coxcomb enough to boast that he was going to Scotland "to see his lady love."

Mary seems to have received him with a graciousness he was all too ready to misunderstand. "He is well entertained, and hath great confidence with the Queen," wrote Randolph, the English ambassador, to Cecil, "riding upon the sorrel gelding that my Lord Robert (Stuart) gave her grace." Politicians had their eye on the affair, as we shall presently see; and there were many to censure "the over-great familiarity that any such personage (as the Queen) showeth to so unworthy a creature and abject a varlet." We are told that he had on his first audience presented Mary with "a book of his own makings written in metre." This is probably those "Frenche

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

Sonnattis in Writt " catalogued in Mary's library at Holyrood. This book is no longer in existence, and little or nothing of Chastelard's poetry seems to have found its way into print. Some few verses are to be found in Le Laboureur's " Additions " to Castelnau's " Memoirs," Castelnau having been one, not the least brilliant, of Mary's escort to Scotland. Here are the first and last verses of a lament which may well have been written, with the thought of Mary :

" Antres prez, monts et plaines,
Rochers, forests, et bois,
Ruisseaux, fleuves, fontaines,
Où perdu je m'en vois :
D'une plainte incertaine
De sanglots toute pleine,
Je veux chanter,
La miserable peine
Qui me fait lamenter

" Ces buissons et ces arbres,
Qui sont entour de moy
Ces rochers et ces marbres
Sçavent bien mon émoi ;
Bref, rien de la nature,
N'ignore ma blessure,
Fors seulement
Toi qui prens nourriture
En mon cruel tourment."

Chastelard was doubtless all the more welcome at Court for being Mary's one remaining link with that "*joyeuseté*" of the Louvre for ever lost to her ; and at all events there seems to have been more godless "*joyeuseté*" at Holyrood than ever during this

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

winter of his return in 1562; and Knox is not the only authority for the statement that Mary's manners towards the infatuated poet were of a perilous familiarity and warmth. Knox, however, is always so piquantly trenchant in his disapproval that he becomes attractive to quote by his very vehemence. "Amongst the minions of the court," he says, "there was one named Monsieur Chatelet, a Frenchman, that at that time passed all others in credit with the Queen. In dancing of the purpose—so term they that dance, in the which man and woman talketh secretly; wise men would judge such fashions more like the bordell than to the comeliness of honest women. In this dance the Queen chose Chatelet, and Chatelet took the Queen, for he had the best dress. All the winter Chatelet was so familiar in the Queen's cabinet, early and late, that scarcely could any of the nobility have access unto her. The Queen would lie upon Chatelet's shoulder, and sometimes privily would steal a kiss of his neck. And all this," Knox adds with a fine snort, so to say, of indignant scorn, "was honest enough; for it was the gentle entreatment of a stranger."

Whether or not these dances, of which Knox has so much to say, really passed beyond decorum is a doubtful question, but we may be very sure that a very little levity would go a long way with the great reformer—better versed in the wrath to come than in the pleasure fashions of the moment;

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

and it is probable that Mrs. Oliphant comes near the truth when she says, commenting on this passage: "Dancing was in those days the most decorous of performances; but if Mary had been proved to have danced a stately *pas seul* in a minuet, it was to Knox, who knew no better, as if she had indulged in the wildest bobbing of a country fair—nay, he would probably have thought the high-skipping rural performance by far the most innocent of the two."

Poor Mary's passion for dancing might almost be said to be a matter of international politics in those days. Elizabeth, who was fond of it herself and jealous of Mary's much limited charms and accomplishments, had asked the opinion of the Scotch ambassador, Melville, as to which was the best dancer, herself or Mary. Melville had answered, with Scotch caution, that they danced differently. "The Queen Mary," he said, "danced not so high and disposedly" as Elizabeth did. Elizabeth, too, had asked if "his mistress played well." "Reasonably, as a Queen," had been his answer.

Though Knox and other such severe onlookers doubtless exaggerated Mary's levity, and unjustly, or ignorantly, put the worst construction upon it, there seems to be no question that her "entertainment" of Chastelard was such as a man wildly in love might too easily misunderstand and presume upon, though, had his eyes been less drugged, he might have noted that, in her moods of affectionate

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

and it is probable that Mrs. Oliphant comes near the truth when she says, commenting on this passage: "Dancing was in those days the most decorous of performances; but if Mary had been proved to have danced a stately *pas seul* in a minuet, it was to Knox, who knew no better, as if she had indulged in the wildest bobbing of a country fair—nay, he would probably have thought the high-skipping rural performance by far the most innocent of the two."

Poor Mary's passion for dancing might almost be said to be a matter of international politics in those days. Elizabeth, who was fond of it herself and jealous of Mary's much limited charms and accomplishments, had asked the opinion of the Scotch ambassador, Melville, as to which was the best dancer, herself or Mary. Melville had answered, with Scotch caution, that they danced differently. "The Queen Mary," he said, "danced not so high and disposedly" as Elizabeth did. Elizabeth, too, had asked if "his mistress played well." "Reasonably, as a Queen," had been his answer.

Though Knox and other such severe onlookers doubtless exaggerated Mary's levity, and unjustly, or ignorantly, put the worst construction upon it, there seems to be no question that her "entertainment" of Chastelard was such as a man wildly in love might too easily misunderstand and presume upon, though, had his eyes been less drugged, he might have noted that, in her moods of affectionate

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

expression, such favours as she showed him were somewhat indiscriminately lavished on all who pleased her, her young pages and her maids of honour alike. Mary, too, was unquestionably a born coquette, was avid of admiration, and unhappy unless she had every one around her in love with her, unmindful of consequences. Chastelard, who had known her at the Court of France, should have been sufficiently forewarned against her "strange soft ways," but he had "kissed the sea-witch on her eyes"—"*La belle dame sans merci*" had him in thrall, and he was determined to win all or lose all on one desperate cast. What Knox sarcastically calls Mary's "gentle entreatment of a stranger" had wrought such madness in him that, on the night of February 12, while Mary was in close conference with her Ministers, Murray and Lethington, he secreted himself, fully armed with sword and dagger, in the Queen's bedchamber. There, before the Queen's retirement, he was discovered by her maids, who said nothing of his intrusion until the morning.

When Mary heard of it she angrily ordered him from her presence, but apparently she must have consented to overlook his offence, for he was allowed to follow the Court, when, later in the day, it removed from Holyrood to St. Andrews. Alas! Mary's clemency seems to have further misled the love-crazed poet, for on the following night he repeated the same egregious offence. This time

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

it was not to be overlooked, for the Queen's cries of alarm brought her attendants, followed presently by the grim Earl of Murray, all too glad, doubtless, in his heart to have such colourable matter against the Queen—who had cried out on him to plunge his dagger in the intruder. But, according to Knox, his friend Murray was too God-fearing a man for such summary work. He promised that Chastelard should be brought to trial instead, and so the doomed poet, putting a gallant face on his tragic dilemma, was removed by the guards. Knox seems to have a sort of pity for "poor Chatelet," as he calls him, but perhaps his intention is rather to point his moral against the Queen, of whose levity, he hints, the poet was made the victim. He represents Murray as falling on his knees before Mary, and the scene proceeds in this fashion: " 'Madam, I beseech your grace, cause me not to take the blood of this man upon me; your grace has entreated him so familiarly before, that ye have offended all your nobility; and now if he shall be secretly slain at your own commandment, what shall the world judge of it? I shall bring him to the presence of justice, and let him suffer by law according to his deserving.' 'O,' said the Queen, 'ye will never let him speak?' 'I shall do,' said he, 'madam, what in me lieth to save your honour.' "

Chastelard's shrift was short. This is Knox's account of the end: "Poor Chatelet was brought

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

back from Kinghorn to St. Andrews, examined, put to an assize, and so beheaded the 22nd of February, 1562. He begged license to write to France the cause of his death, 'which,' said he, in his tongue, was '*Pour être trouve en lieu trop suspect*'; that is, 'Because I was found in a place too much suspected.' At the place of execution, when he saw that there was no remedy but death, he made a godly confession, and granted, that his declining from the truth of God, and following of vanity and impiety, was justly recompensed upon him. But in the end he concluded, looking unto the heavens, with these words, 'O cruelle dame!' that is, 'cruel mistress.' What that complaint imported, lovers may divine. And so," concludes Knox with a Puritanical snuffle of satisfaction, and a final fling at the Queen, "received Chatelet the reward of his dancing; for he lacked his head, that his tongue should not utter the secrets of our Queen. 'Deliver us, O Lord, from the rage of such inordinate rulers.'"

Strange indeed as it seems to our modern notions, Mary was present at Chastelard's execution—the second lover she had seen die within six months for her sake. "Most lovely, but most cruel of her sex," had been Lord John Gordon's last cry to her, only a short while before, and now Chastelard takes farewell of her from the same scaffold in almost identical words: "Adieu to thee so beautiful and so cruel—who kills me, and yet whom I shall never

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

cease to love." So runs one version, slightly elaborating on Knox, as also on Brantôme, who was also present at the execution, and supplements, or rather corrects, Knox's account of Chastelard's good end with a picturesque and appropriate variant. According to him it was not the consolations of religion that Chastelard found at the end, but the consolation of poetry, with a volume of Ronsard for his breviary. "Executed," says Brantôme, "for his presumption—the presumption of Phaëton—and not for any crime he stood on the scaffold with the hymns of Ronsard in his hand, and for his eternal consolation he read through the 'Hymn of Death,' which is very well made, and very suitable to bring peace to the dying, seeking the support of no other spiritual book, nor any minister or confessor. Coming to an end of his reading, he turned towards the place where he believed the Queen to be, and cried aloud, 'Adieu, most beautiful and most cruel princess in the world!' And then, very calmly offering his neck to the executioner, he allowed himself to be despatched with the utmost ease."

Years after, when Mary herself had come to the block at Fotheringay, there were those who had recalled Chastelard's last words, and Mary's cruelty in thus allowing him to die. Brantôme, however, would justify the Queen against such censure. "Some," he says, "have wished to discover why he had called her so cruel—was it because she had had

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

no pity on his love, or no pity on his life ? But how was it possible to have shown that last ? If, after her first pardon, she had pardoned him still a second time, she would have been entirely compromised ; and so to save her honour, it was necessary that the law should take its course." There, one cannot but feel, speaks the man of sense, as well as the man of the world. Chastelard, as Brantôme had said, had played at Phaëton, and must take the consequences, as it must be admitted he did with courage and dignity and with a proper sense of that dramatic effect the occasion demanded.

There were those who hinted, and indeed said, what one cannot believe, nay ! will not even think of believing, that there was political method in Chastelard's madness, and that his tragic escapade was a deliberate affront put upon the Queen by her Huguenot enemies in France, with a view to fouling her good name with Philip of Spain, whose son was looked upon at that time as her possible husband. It is possible, indeed, that such enemies may, without his suspicion of their motives, have inflamed Chastelard's passion and worked on his vanity for such hidden ends, but, tragic fool as Chastelard undoubtedly was, the whole picture we get of him forbids any such mean shadow upon his splendid folly. A glorious and graceful fool, maybe, but surely no worse than that ; and one cannot but feel that the man who loved Mary so wildly that he was willing to give his life for a kiss compares well,

MARY STUART & PIERRE CHASTELARD

after all, with a coarse, rough-riding Bothwell whose so-called love was not for Mary, but her throne. Standing there on his scaffold, with that volume of Ronsard in his hand, and his eyes with their last long look seeking his Queen, surely he cuts no such sorry figure, after all, and deserves his "place in the story."

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

IN addition to the well-authenticated "muses" of certain poets, women of known name and history who have been loved and sung into that literary legend we grandiosely speak of as "immortality," the world of poetry is haunted by less defined shapes of womanhood, women who live for us only in the verse which they have ostensibly inspired, often mere decorative names at the head of a poem, flowery nominations, pretty labels, as it were, on the conserves of past emotions. Such are Petrarch's Laura, Herrick's Julia, Waller's Sacharissa; and, more shadowy still, the fragrant sisterhood of Lesbias, Chloes, and Corinnas, from the days of Catullus, Horace, and Ovid to the coming of Wordsworth's Lucy and Tennyson's Mariana.

The question "Who is Sylvia?" may be asked equally in vain of many another name lyrically illustrious, and it is to be feared that such pretty names too often stand for no one faithfully loved girl, but for many girls loved faithlessly and thus collectively honoured—or, to put it more magnificently, "not woman, but the angel that is the type of all

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

women." As a matter of fact, all love-poems, however sincerely addressed to one woman, who may indeed be the immediate provocation of them, are actually inspired by and written to all women. The poet is by nature a born lover of women, and however faithfully he may deem himself to be celebrating the one woman of the moment, or even of a life-time, it is his general sentiment for the sex at large that really floods his poem with vitality and gives it universality. Usually, too, the one great love of a poet's life is the culmination of other lesser loves, which are absorbed in it, as by a process of transmigration. The dead passion for Chloe lives again in the live passion for Corinna, and even the casual tenderness learnt from a forgotten Amaryllis may contribute to the perfection of that deeper emotion reserved for the heart's Beatrice and Laura. "How many suns it takes to make one speedwell blue!"

Besides, women in general must also share with a still more universal muse the credit of a poet's inspiration, no less a muse than Nature herself, which is a poet's first and last passion, and of whom woman is but one, though the chief, accident. In the inspiration of all great love-poems woman must consent to divide honours with the universe; with the starry night, with the sea's mystery, or the singing of some April bird. She is so much to the poet because she stands for so much more, mysteriously gathering up in her strange being the diffused

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

thrill and marvel of existence. Probably, if a poet told the truth, he would admit that the moon or the sea is more to him than any woman, however wonderful; but a woman is as near as he can get to those mysteries:

“Sometimes thou seemest not as thyself alone
But as the meaning of all things that are.”

It is in that mood that a poet loves his beloved best—when, that is, she transcends herself, and becomes the sacramental vessel of the universe. One might compare a woman's eyes to those magic crystals, employed by seers for the purposes of divination.

The poet's rapt gaze is not at them, but through them into that spiritual azure of which they are the fairy windows. For this reason, perhaps then, a poet's ranging fancy, from one fair face to another, should not be imputed to him for a vulgar inconstancy, but rather for a divine instructive constancy to the spirit of beauty in all things, which he was born to seek, to worship, and to celebrate.

It is this universal quality of a poet's love that in its turn gives to its accidental objects their universal significance and appeal, thus charging the beloved's name with more than a merely personal historical meaning, and making it symbolize for all men certain types of beauty and certain ways of living. Even where the poet's mistress is historically individualized, as in the case of Beatrice Portinari, she ceases to be one individual woman and becomes the

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

symbol for all time of love in its loftiest spiritual exaltation, as that Clodia the pleasure-loving wife of Quintus Metellus Aler, who wept so bitterly at the death of her sparrow, and likewise poisoned her husband, becomes for all time, as the Lesbia of Catullus, the symbol of love whose joys are mainly of the senses. "The poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice, ours is the choice," it comes naturally to Meredith to write; for these two names have become fixed formulæ of expression, a part of the picture-language of mankind.

Similarly, Petrarch's Laura is not remembered for herself, for any of those gifts and graces Petrarch so industriously sang, but, as the symbol of the lifelong faithfulness and high-flown adoration of her lover, Laura may, I think, be said to have survived Petrarch, and his fame to have died in giving her immortality; so it seems to some of us nowadays, striving in vain to appreciate at its ancient valuation the monument of sugar so patiently piled up and elaborately fretted through so many years in her honour. The interest that survives for us in Laura and Petrarch to-day is not in the poetry, or even in the lovers themselves, but in the spiritual and social conditions of a time which could make such a kind of fame possible, could elevate a private love-affair into a matter of public European importance. Consider this incident and its significance. When Charles of Luxemburg paid a visit to Avignon—Laura's city—being entertained at a

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

symbol for all time of love in its loftiest spiritual exaltation, as that Clodia the pleasure-loving wife of Quintus Metellus Aler, who wept so bitterly at the death of her sparrow, and likewise poisoned her husband, becomes for all time, as the Lesbia of Catullus, the symbol of love whose joys are mainly of the senses. "The poet's Lesbia, the poet's Beatrice, ours is the choice," it comes naturally to Meredith to write; for these two names have become fixed formulæ of expression, a part of the picture-language of mankind.

Similarly, Petrarch's Laura is not remembered for herself, for any of those gifts and graces Petrarch so industriously sang, but, as the symbol of the lifelong faithfulness and high-flown adoration of her lover, Laura may, I think, be said to have survived Petrarch, and his fame to have died in giving her immortality; so it seems to some of us nowadays, striving in vain to appreciate at its ancient valuation the monument of sugar so patiently piled up and elaborately fretted through so many years in her honour. The interest that survives for us in Laura and Petrarch to-day is not in the poetry, or even in the lovers themselves, but in the spiritual and social conditions of a time which could make such a kind of fame possible, could elevate a private love-affair into a matter of public European importance. Consider this incident and its significance. When Charles of Luxemburg paid a visit to Avignon—Laura's city—being entertained at a

'OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

great festival in his honour, at which all the local nobility attended, he desired that, among the ladies present, Laura should be pointed out to him. This being done, he motioned the other ladies aside, and, approaching Laura, he gazed with reverent interest into her face for a moment, and then respectfully kissed her on the forehead and on the eyelids. Thus even in her own life-time had Laura become a canonized figure; and, nearly two hundred years after, when her tomb was discovered and opened, no less a King than Francis I. was there to do her honour. How impossible to imagine any such ceremonies in our time, or to parallel in any form so public a participation in any lofty spiritual sentiment whatsoever. Through Laura alone we realize how real and influential a fact was that troubadour convention of which Petrarch's poetry was the supreme culmination, and what a genuine force it must have been in the spiritual development of the time. The love of Petrarch for Laura was not indeed regarded as a merely private affair, but as a crowning conspicuous example of what one might call the public worship of Womanhood, just then elevated by the troubadours into a sort of poetic religion. The fact of Laura being the wife of another man, Hugh de Sade, a noble of her own rank, was, of course, but in keeping with the curious troubadour convention, which, in the choice of a married woman for its muse, implied the high platonism of its adoration; for it is not necessary

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

to say that the essence of troubadour passion was its hopelessness of the customary amorous rewards.

Love of an object too high for its attainment, and therefore a love of pure spirit, though repressed in the language of passion, was its ideal. That is the reason why troubadour poetry for the most part, Petrarch's included, is such dreary reading. It is so evidently mere literary ingenuity displaying itself in a vacuum of feeling, the bloodless euphuism born of the feigned worship of an abstraction. Thus Laura, for all Petrarch's protestation, became less a woman than a theme, much as in our time the death of Arthur Hallam grew to be less a grief to Tennyson than a starting-point for meditation on death and immortality. Yet Petrarch was very positive that none should doubt either the reality of his mistress or his passion. There is extant a letter of his to his friend the Bishop of Lombez, who, it would appear, had manifested a modern scepticism on the subject of his grand passion. "Would to God," writes Petrarch, "that my Laura were indeed but an imaginary person, and my passion for her but sport! Alas! it is rather a madness! hard would it have been, and painful, to feign so long a time—and what extravagance to play such a force in the world! No! we may counterfeit the action and voice of a sick man, but not the paleness and wasted looks of the sufferer; and how often have you witnessed both in me."

Petrarch has recorded his first meeting with Laura

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

in a famous inscription in his copy of Virgil preserved at Milan. After the manner of Dante in the "Vita Nuova," he writes : "Laura, illustrious by her own virtues, and long celebrated by my verses, I beheld for the first time, in my early youth, on the 6th of April, 1327, about the first hour of the day, in the church of Saint Claire in Avignon : and in the same city, in the same month of April, the same day and hour, in the year 1348, this light of my life was withdrawn from the world while I was in Verona, ignorant, alas ! of what had befallen me."

Petrarch had, therefore, been writing sonnets to Laura for twenty-one years, as he was to continue doing at intervals for another twenty-six. Surely a monstrous constancy. Schlegel has said that Laura herself might well have been *ennuyée* had she been compelled to read the whole of Petrarch's sonnets to her at a sitting ; and Byron has his own cynical explanation of the matter :

"Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch's wife
He would have written sonnets all his life ?"

Though it seems to be a general truth that the voice of the nightingale is hushed by marriage—as sings George Meredith :

" . . . the nightingale scarce ever charms the long twilight :
Mute with the cares of the nest."

yet some married men have written exceedingly long and dull poems on their wives, as some wives

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

have inspired some excellent poetry too. The once famous Castara of William Habington is an example of the Muse Matrimonial. Habington was a pious man of the metaphysical school of poets that enjoyed a certain vogue during the first half of the seventeenth century, and he prides himself on the propriety of his inspiration. "If," he says ironically in a preface, "the innocency of a chaste muse should be more acceptable and weigh heavier in the balance of esteem, than a fame begot in adultery of study, I doubt I shall leave no hope of competition"; and again he says, "when love builds upon the rock of chastity, it may safely condemn the battery of the waves and threatenings of the wind, since time, that makes a mockery of the firmest structures, shall itself be ruined before that be demolished." Would that the poet were as good as the husband, yet Castara—in life Lucia, daughter of the first Lord Powis—has contrived to live in literary history through verses such as these :

"Like the violet which, alone,
Prosper in some happy shade,
My Castara lives unknown,
To no looser eye betray'd,
For she's to herself untrue,
Who delights i' th' public view. . . .

"She her throne makes reason climb,
While wild passions captive lie :
And each article of time,
Her pure thoughts to heaven fly :
All her vows religious be,
And her love she vows to me."

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Another very different champion of the muse matrimonial is John Donne. Through all the crusts of metaphysical conceits there breaks in Donne's poetry the flame of white interior fires, set alight by one of the bravest and most attractive wives in the history of love. Anne More was the daughter of Sir George More, Lord Lieutenant of the Tower, a father whose sternness made a runaway marriage necessary, and whose implacability hampered the devoted couple for years. Yet, through all, their love wore a gallant feather of romance, romance productive of no less than twelve children, as well as Donne's finest poems, and living still in one or two anecdotes of a peculiarly vivid humanity. Such is the story of Donne during an absence from England seeing his wife in a vision. She was in childbed at the time, but did not die. "I have seen," he told a friend who was with him, "my dead wife pass twice by me through this room, with her hair hanging about her shoulders, and a dead child in her arms." We get a glimpse of her spirit in her wish, on the occasion of one of Donne's enforced business visits abroad, to accompany her husband dressed as a page. One has a childish wish that he had given in to her whim, and taken her with him. He wrote her a charming lyric instead :

"Sweetest love, I do not go,
For weariness of thee,
Nor in hope the world can show
A fitter love for me ;

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

But since that I
At the last must part, 'tis best,
Thus to use myself in jest
By feignéd deaths to die."

For another absence he has this gayer solace :

"By absence this good means I gain,
That I can catch her
Where none can watch her,
In some close corner of my brain.
There I embrace and kiss her ;
And so I both enjoy and miss her."

But the brave story, like all brave stories, had to end ; and she was to leave Donne alone, with a new-born child, their twelfth, when he was but forty-two. Her death was to make him a great divine, as her love had made him a great poet. Who does not know those solemn lines written against his burial :

"Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm
Nor question much
That subtle wreath of hair about mine arm ;
The mystery, the sign, you must not touch,
For 'tis my outward soul
Viceroy to that, which unto Heav'n being gone,
Will leave this to control,
And keep these limbs, these provinces from dissolution."

As some of these half legendary women live as the symbols of the great ways of loving, love's passion, love's idealism, love's faithfulness, so others stand for the more tender, playful aspects of love, or survive by some trait of manner, some one charm, or even some trick of dress. So Lesbia, as we have said, lives by her little sparrow, which still chirps

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

so prettily and pathetically—*ad solam dominam usque pipilabat*—in royal Latin till this day :

“O it was sweet to hear him twitter—twitter
In the dear bosom where he made his nest !
Lesbia, sweetheart, who shall say how bitter
This grief to us—so small to all the rest ? . . .

“And in no other bosom would he sing,
But sometimes sitting here and sometimes there,
On one bough and another, would he sing—
Faithful to Lesbia—as I am to her. . . .

“Foul shades of Orcus, evil you befall !
'Tis true you smote her little sparrow dead—
But this you did to Lesbia worse than all :
You made her eyes with weeping—O so red !”

Ben Jonson's Celia, who seems to have been no one in particular, lives for us only with her eyes, as Sir John Suckling's “dearest princess, Aglaura,” by her delicious feet, those feet that—

“Beneath her petticoat,
Like little mice, stole in and out,
As if they fear'd the light.”

and Waller's Sacharissa by her famous girdle :

“A narrow compass ! and yet there
Dwelt all that's good, and all that's fair.
Give me but what this ribbon bound,
Take all the rest the sun goes round.”

Waller's great fame as a poet is hard to realize nowadays, and even the name of “Sacharissa” seems to survive with a sort of silent derision as

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

being an extreme example, almost a parody, of the affected names under which it was once the fashion for poets to celebrate their mistresses. Probably the "Sophonisba" of James Thomson—

"O Sophonisba ! Sophonisba O !"—

reached the limit of affectation. Lady Dorothea Sydney, eldest daughter of the Earl of Leicester, whose hand Waller in vain sought, in his frigid courtly fashion, was a personality deserving a more warm-blooded immortality. But true passion was as lacking to Waller's nature as it is to his poetry. He was, by the way, the first poet to abstain from intoxicating drink. He was almost as well known as a "water-drinker" as a wit; and of his "wit" one ungallant example does not show him in a very favourable light either as a lover or even a gentleman. It is said that, when both he and Sacharissa, then the widowed Lady Sunderland, had grown somewhat elderly, she had met him at some reception, and, smilingly reminding him of their young days, had asked him, "When will you write such fine verses on me again?" "When you are as young, madam, and as handsome as you were then," was the brutal answer of her one-time lover. Very evidently she had done well in bestowing her hand elsewhere, and it is presumed that Waller was then too old to be called out for his insolence. It is rather the reverse of an honour that "Sacharissa"

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

should live by association with such a coxcomb. It is pleasanter to think of her as the sister of Algernon Sydney.

As Sacharissa by her girdle, so Herrick's Julia lives by her "tempestuous petticoat," that most bewitching and gallant of all immortal garments. Julia's mortal identity is even more completely hidden in her anonymous immortality than her buxom comeliness was hidden in "the winning wave" of her famous petticoat, and there is no reason to wish her more definitely individualized. Herrick was not the man to have a great love-affair. Woman was to him a seductive impersonality, a being of bloom and bright eyes, red lips, pearly teeth, and rounded contours, good to go a-Maying with—just a woman, but *not* "a spirit too." He confessed that he never wished for marriage, and, though he wrote some fine religious poetry, he was, as a rule, very well contented with the charming surfaces, the flower-like forms and perfumes of things; and he loved women as he loved his daffodils, with a pagan simplicity and satisfaction in their beauty and freshness, an enjoyment untainted with cynicism, and, though touched with pathos, never troubled with those Wordsworthian thoughts too deep for tears. It is a healthy, sweet-smelling, May-morning world, a veritable Hesperides, of golden apples and "golden lads and lasses," in which he invites us to go a-Maying—whether it be with Julia or

LEGENDARY LADIES OF THE POETS

Corinna is all one to the easy-going, light-hearted

vicar—"Rise, and put on your foliage, and be seen
To come forth, like the spring-time, fresh and green,
And sweet as Flora. Take no care
For jewels for your gown or hair ;
Fear not, the leaves will strew
Gems in abundance upon you. . . ."

He might well have preached worse sermons, don't you think, to his Devonshire parishioners.

As one turns over the leaves of any collection of old love-songs, many another flower-like name "pleads against oblivion," surely not in vain ; for in nothing is the preservative magic of words more strikingly illustrated than the manner in which, by little more than the musical mention of a name, they contrive to make it live for us with a creative suggestiveness. All that is needed is a name—not necessarily a beautiful one—and a lyrical word or two, a brief rhythm sincerely accented with feeling, enough stalk, so to speak, to carry the flower, and we have evoked for us as by enchantment an undying face of legend.

Such is old Skelton's "Merry Margaret" :

“. . . merry Margaret
As midsummer flower,
Gentle as falcon,
Or hawk on the tower."

Such, too, is Campion's Amaryllis :

"I care not for these ladies,
That must be wooed and prayed :
Give me kind Amarillis,
The wanton country maid."

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

Such sometimes even is the power of the mere title of a poem, as Lovelace's "To Lucasta on Going to the Wars," or Cleveland's "On Phyllis—Walking before Sunrise."

Such, to come to later times, is Lamb's magic with "When maidens such as Hester die"; or Landor's immortalizing sigh over Rose Aylmer. Alfred de Musset and Rossetti—with those names that are "five sweet symphonies"—employ this gift with charming results.

All that seems to be necessary is for the poet to love the name enough, and to speak it, or sing it, or sigh it, as though he loved it, to carve it like Rosalind's on some tree in the forest, and the miracle is done. Next to nothing need be said, except her name, called out on that wind of Time that blows so many beautiful names about the world. Not idly, therefore, have the poets claimed to set the names of their beloved among the stars. Their lightest song has proved their power to keep their word, and only those women are forgotten who have been as unfortunate as she of whom it was said :

"She had no poet—and she died."

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

(An Excursus on an Ancient Controversy)

FROM time to time there is revived a very ancient controversy, old as that of light and darkness.

Certain prophets of evil toll the passing bell of blond beauty and foresee its ultimate eclipse in a night of raven locks and coal-black eyes. This was predicted some fourteen years ago by Henry T. Finck in his treatise on “Romantic Love and Personal Beauty,” wherein he saw, so to speak, the finish of the last blonde in a dime museum. With Mr. Finck it is the Spanish beauty first, and the rest nowhere. His passion for “the ladies of Cadiz” equals Lord Byron’s, and he writes as if inspired by a love-potion brewed by one of those Andalusian brunettes who, to his mind, prefigure “the perfected woman of the millennium.”

“Who round the North for paler dames would seek?” he quotes contemptuously; and that his is no hasty conclusion five hundred odd closely printed pages of erudition on his pleasant and witty subject bear witness.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

The brunettes may rejoice in so well-equipped a champion; but, doughty as Mr. Finck is, the blondes—need one say it?—are no less well defended. As a matter of fact, they seem to have had it pretty much their own way in literature, from the time of Eve, of whose blondness Milton seems to have had no doubt. He says that she—

“As a veil, down to the slender waist
Her unadorned golden tresses wore
Dishevell’d, but in wanton ringlets waved,
As the vine curls her tendrils.”

Adam’s legendary first wife, Lilith, “the witch he loved before the gift of Eve,” seems to have been of the same complexion, if we may trust Rossetti, who seems to have known more about her than any other poet, and who tells us that “her enchanted hair was the first gold.” The same poet, in another place, sings of—

“Youth, with still some single golden hair
Unto his shoulder clinging.”

Yes, that famous authority, Youth, is mostly “solid” for blondes—the youth of the world and the youth of the individual alike. One might venture, I think, on the dictum that a man’s first love is always blond, but his last love brunette. Dante speaks of the blond tresses of Beatrice, and is not Venus herself always *Venus aurea*, “the golden Aphrodite”? Ceres, the bounteous earth-mother, might almost be called the mother of

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

blondes, whereas brunettes might unkindly be said to trace their descent from her daughter, Proserpine, the unhappy queen of Pluto's realm. So Mr. Finck might say ; but surely not I. I have not the temerity to take sides in so dangerous an encounter. Safer to be on both sides at once, like the witty Frenchman who sang :

“ Est-elle brune ? Est-elle blonde ?
Rien ne l'égale dans ce monde ;
Rien n'égale aussi mon amour ;
Et, sans être inconstant, j'ai la bonne fortune
D'être amant en un même jour
Et d'une belle blonde, et d'une belle brune.”

I have just come upon the above stanza in a delightful treatise which I have unearthed in a desultory ramble round my shelves, dipping into this volume and that in search of light on this great subject ; one of those delicately ordered disquisitions made only in France on the blond beauties of the Venetian school of painting—“ *Les Femmes Blondes, selon les Peintres de l'Ecole de Venise.*”

The anonymous writers—“ *deux Vénitiens,*” they call themselves—have made the masterpieces of Venetian painting the appropriate peg on which to hang various charming learning in celebration of blond beauty, and they supplement their essay with a fragrant garland of poetry in praise of blond womanhood, from Hesiod to Sainte-Beuve—“ *La Guirlande Poétique des Femmes Blondes.*” They add a charming bundle of quaint “ *recettes,*” collected

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

from old Italian sources, recipes for the making of what we should nowadays call "peroxide blondes"—a process which sounds ever so much prettier and more respectable as they used to say it in Latin *ad faciendum capillos aureos*.

We shall help ourselves to the learning of our two Venetians from time to time as we go on; but it is not the very existence of such a treatise, to start with curiously significant of the seriousness with which this old warfare of blonde *versus* brunette has been waged? Certainly it is a well-foughten field, and trivial as at first sight the dispute may seem there can be no question that it has the mysterious depth and bitterness of a natural enmity. From time immemorial blondes and brunettes have cordially despised and hated each other; and lovers of beauty, according to unexplained natural affinities, have taken sides, Guelf and Ghibelline, in this old-world struggle.

Colour, anyhow, is a mystery. Scientists do not pretend—or only pretend—to explain it. That it has some profound meaning hidden away in the depth of things, and that differences of colour stand for spiritual differences correspondingly marked or subtle, no sensitive person doubts. There are, as we know, highly gifted beings who profess to see the colours of the soul. Indeed, there is a whole mystic literature on the subject worthy the attention of the curious.

From the beginning mankind seems to have had

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

a marked preference for blond things, a sense of security in their presence, a feeling that their blondness stood for a central beneficence and innocence in their nature; whereas darkness has been similarly suspect as standing for hidden and possibly evil qualities and powers. It is not, I think, too fantastic to see in this man's primitive fear of the dark, and to trace the universal preference for blond wigs in artificial periods to his primitive worship of the sun.

The deities to which, in the terrifying mystery of his childhood, he has turned for protection have usually been blond, as have most of those gracious personifications which embodied his notions of unseen beneficent influences. Apollo in the South and Balder in the North were both golden-haired gods; so was Dionysus, “the spirit of fire and dew, alive and leaping in a thousand vines.” Angels and saviours of the world have usually been imagined as blond. Man's most appealing symbol of divine love, the Madonna, from Raphael to Rossetti, comes to us in a halo of her own golden hair. Athena is always “the grey-eyed”; Aurora, Flora, Pomona, and the Graces are all blondes.

The brunettes, however, may claim Juno, the most royal lady of Olympus, for their own, as also, it is not without significance to note, the nine Muses. The mysterious Hecate, too, is theirs, and all sinister, beautiful deities of magic arts and tragic dooms. The Furies were brunettes, and likewise

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

the Fates ; but, on the other hand, the Norns were grey-eyed, and the Valkyries, " the choosers of the slain," were redoubtable blondes, with their streaming, blood-stained locks of Northern gold. It is impossible to imagine Cupid with black hair and olive skin, and his beloved Psyche was doubtless as blond as a ray of sunshine playing amid her tendrilled curls.

Then again, so many natural things useful to and dear to man are blond, such as honey and corn and oil, springing grass and running water and the sheltering foliage of trees, with their golden fruits. The flowers man loves best are blue or white ; and of the birds, is not the soul a white bird, and the bluebird man's symbol of happiness ? Dark-hued flowers bring with them a certain fear, such as the deadly nightshade—the belladonna of brunette beauty—or they suggest sorrow. Black plumage always marks the bird of ill omen ; though we may parenthesize in passing that it is persons of dark complexion who are in demand to bring good luck on such occasions as New Year's Eve.

Money, it is perhaps not impertinent to observe is a blond commodity ; though Sparta, I believe had an iron coinage—but when did money ever look black ? And, not inappropriately, the old school history legend of Gregory the Great and the English captives comes to one's mind, and his pious pun represents the immemorial attitude of humanity toward blondes. They look so like angels !

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

How far history bears out this instinctive sentiment we shall have occasion to inquire, but we may remark in passing that one of the most illustrious of beautiful blondes was Lucrezia Borgia. There is extant a dazzling description of her as she drew all eyes on one of her glittering progresses through Italy; and record is made of her stopping at Imola that she might wash her hair, that golden hair which she wore sometimes in a coif of golden net sown with jewels and tied with a black ribbon, while at other times she rode on horseback with it streaming loose across her glorious shoulders.

A propos this, our two Venetians above-mentioned tell us that in the sixteenth century the roofs of houses in Venice were crowned with little wooden erections, shaped Belvidere fashion, where the Venetian ladies used to sit the day long with their beautiful tresses spread out in the sun. They more than hint, however, that the glitter of these tresses might be described, in Swinburne's phrase, as “not golden, but gilded”; and this, indeed, will be a fitting place to quote one of those quaint Venetian recipes for the guidance of the feminine alchemist:

“Take an ounce and a half of lupins, one of myrrh, half an ounce of larkspur, half an ounce of dry lees of white wine; steep the whole in water which you have made to boil with red-hot cinders of the vine. Leave it to steep all night, and, the following morning, bathe your hair in it.

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

You will thus obtain tresses so blond that golden thread will be put to shame. The virtue of lupins, for this object, is marvellous, and there comes to mind another means no less perfect.

“When, in the spring, the buds of the poplar first appear, and they begin to put forth those light shoots which will later become leaves, gather some of them, say about two ounces, and place them in eight or a dozen ounces of oil; heat them over the fire until they thicken; then expose in a phial in the sun. When used, in a very short time, from the effect of this oil, your hair will become very blond and very beautiful.”

Were there space, I might also copy for the fair—or dark—reader particulars of the manner of making the face as “white as the albatross,” or tell “how a certain balm makes the complexion whiter than snow.” These delightful recipes, something like a hundred in number, sufficiently explain the disappointment of a certain gallant Abbé de Bernis, who, about the time of the Revolution, made a pilgrimage to Venice in quest of the glorious blondes he had worshipped in Titian, Tintoretto, and Paul Veronese; not the red and white blondes of the North, as found in Germany, in Scandinavia, and, above all, in England, “that Eldorado of blondes, where the word ‘fair’ is a synonym for beautiful,” but blondes, as Maurice Hewlett has since described them, “splendidly coloured as a sunburnt nectarine, crowned with a mass of red-

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?” gold hair.” Alas for the traveller’s dreams, the women he saw in the streets were beautiful indeed, but black as crows !

Was some caprice of nature subsequent to the age of the great painters responsible for this disappointment ? Surely not, exclaim our two ingenious Venetians. The answer is in the writings of those old beauty doctors, and the disquieting conclusion forced upon one is that beauty so victoriously golden has seldom been the unassisted creation of nature in any time or country, and that the preponderance of blond beauty in all ages has been rather one of the illusions of art than one of the eternal verities of ethnology.

Théophile Gautier, it may be recalled, had a similar disillusionizing experience to that of the Abbé de Bernis. He gives the history of it in a short story called “The Fleece of Gold,” in which you may read how a young French artist, surfeited with the brunette beauty of his own and other brunette lands, determined to go to Antwerp in quest of the blondes beloved by Rubens.

“It is decided,” he said to himself. “I will love a Fleming !”

So he takes the diligence to Brussels, and, as soon as possible after his arrival, he posts himself in a spot suitable for observation, and scrutinizes the promenading fair. But, alas, “he met an incalculable number of negresses, mulattresses, quadroons, half-breeds, griffs, yellow women, copper-coloured

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

women, green women, women of the colour of a boot-flap—but not a single blonde.” In disgust, he determines to try Antwerp, but at first the like ill-success follows him, darting from street to street, “seeking the blonde with an ardour worthy of the knights errant of old.” At last—but how he came at last to discover his Gretchen the reader must find out for himself by reading the story. Suffice it that it ends with this dialogue :

“‘Well!’ said Gretchen, when he had finished his great picture of Aphrodite rising from the sea, ‘are you satisfied with your model?’

“‘When would you like to publish our banns?’ was the painter’s significant reply.”

If, then, such sleuth-hounds of feminine loveliness as the Abbé de Bernis and Théophile Gautier found the *aurea puella* so shy a quarry in the lands of Rubens and of Paul Veronese alike, are we not, as I have said, forced to the conclusion that nature is by no means so blond in her preference and productiveness as art has led us to suppose, and that her laws of “natural selection” and “survival of the fittest” are rather on the side of the brunette. Mr. Finck has no doubt whatever as to this, and has ready to hand statistics on his side, as follows :

“Almost eleven million school-children were examined in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Belgium, and the results showed that Switzerland has only 11·10, Austria 19·79, and Germany 31·80 per cent of pure blondes. Thus the very country

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

which since the days of ancient Rome has been proverbially known as the home of yellow hair and blue eyes, has to-day only 32 pure blondes in a hundred; while the average of pure brunettes is already 14·05 per cent, and in some regions as high as 25 per cent. The 53·15 per cent of the mixed type are evidently being slowly transformed into pure brunettes, thanks to intermarriages with neighbours of the dark variety.

“In England, Dr. Beddoe has collected a number of statistics which also bear out the theory that brunettes are gaining on blondes. Among 726 women examined, he found 369 brunettes and 357 blondes. Of the brunettes he found that 78·5 per cent were married, while of the blondes only 68 per cent were married. Thus it would seem that a brunette has ten chances of getting married in England to a blonde's nine. Hence Dr. Beddoe reasons that the English are becoming darker because the men persist in selecting the darker-haired women as wives.”

Wigs, then, and peroxide would seem to be the explanation of the apparent predominance of blondes on our carboniferous planet; but this fact, if it be a fact, impresses one with another—the curious observation that, whatever their complexion, the majority of women have either *wished* to be blond, or that the prevailing taste of the world has preferred them to be so, or to seem so. To call a woman “dark” would seem often to

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

have been considered by her as a term of reproach. Says Phoebe in "As You Like It" :

"I have more cause to hate him than to love him ;
For what had he to do to chide at me ?
He said mine eyes were black and my hair black,
And, now I am remembered, scorned at me."

Even the beautiful Shulamite felt it necessary to explain that, though she was black, yet was she comely ; and how tenderly a shepherd in one of the idyls of Theocritus consoles his love for being swarthy:

"They call thee a gipsy, gracious Bombyca, and lean and sunburnt. 'Tis only I that call thee honey-pale. Yea, and the violet is swart, and swart the lettered hyacinth, but yet these flowers are chosen the first in garlands."

All the same, if hairdressers had been forced to exist on the manufacture of black wigs, the fraternity would hardly have been as prosperous as it has ever been. Surely, in classical days, it would have gone barefoot ; for the manufacture of blond wigs and the traffic in blond hair was one of the great commercial industries of antiquity. The ghostly Roman ladies on the Pompeian frescoes all wear the same shade of yellow, and emperors and poets alike set the fashion for blond hair, which the more luxurious were accustomed to powder with gold-dust. Nero's queen was blond ; blond also was the Faustina of Marcus Aurelius—

"With state of splendid hair that droops
Each side, Faustine."

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

The locks that Horace loved best to see bound up with elegant simplicity—*simplex munditiis*—were yellow. Those were Pyrrha's, but the tresses of his Phyllis and Chloe were of the same fashionable tint. Catullus has celebrated “the yellow crown” of his Berenice, Propertius the like adornment of his Cynthia, and Tibullus also has sung to the same colour. Homer's Helen was golden—not, one likes to think in her case, gilded—and the blondness of Virgil's Dido would seem to hint that Æneas had a preference for brunettes.

In the days when the witty Apuleius, another philo-blonde, wrote his “Golden Ass,” country maidens with blond hair had literally, as Christian Rossetti says, “much gold upon their heads,” for great ladies were eager to buy it up at good prices. In much later days, at Neris, a certain village in France, there used to be an annual fair where the peasant girls came to barter their locks with enterprising pedlars; and who has not agonized with Victor Hugo's poor Fantine!

But need one say that the blondes did not have it quite all their own way with antiquity? If the brunettes were numerically outclassed, yet it may be held that in quality they more than made good. Cleopatra, it will be remembered, did not feel it necessary to wear a yellow wig, but, possibly in irony, loved to surround herself with blond slaves. Zenobia, too, seems to have been imperiously raven-locked and black-eyed; and Sappho

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

is no inconsiderable asset to the brunette side of the account. Swinburne sings of—

“The small dark body’s Lesbian loveliness
That held the fire eternal.”

If, as one of her editors suggests, one may accept an alternative reading of the phrase “violet-weaving,” applied to her by Alcæus, and substitute “violet-tressed,” she would seem to have been distinguished by that beautiful blue-black hair—black hair with blue reflections in it—attributed to the Muses.

Of other fair women of antiquity dowered with that “supreme beauty” which Lamartine has finely called “a royalty of the senses,” the famous Phryne, who convinced a court of law by the loveliness of her form, seems to have been golden as honey. Calypso, too, and the Sirens were undoubtedly minted of human gold; and of ladies in the same siren class of later times, Nell Gwynn and Lady Hamilton must be counted as natural blondes. On the other hand, Diane de Poitiers, whose beauty recipes seem to have been chiefly cold baths and early rising, had “rich purple-black hair, which took a golden tint in the sunshine.”

Of Greek women who added learning to beauty, Aspasia goes to the brunettes, but Hypatia’s eyes were blue and her hair yellow. Of later learned ladies who were beautiful as well, Vittoria Colonna

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?” had “large, bright eyes and golden hair”; Beatrice d’Este was a sunbright beauty; and the eyes of the great-hearted Héloïse “reflected the azure tints of heaven.”

Coming to later times, Mme. de Maintenon, the recording angel of Louis XIV, had “sparkling black eyes and a fine complexion.” Mme. Récamier is catalogued as “complexion brilliant, little rosy mouth, pearly teeth, black curling hair, soft expressive eyes.” Mme. de Sévigné, mark you, is portrayed for us by Mignard, and by Lamartine, in words no less glowing than the painting, with “rich locks of fair hair, dreamy blue eyes, fine folding eyelids of alabaster veined with azure, and a complexion in the fresh flower, which neither time nor sorrow ever faded.” Lamartine adds other enthusiastic details, “making her image seem in our eyes to fill all space, and reach even to heaven,” and suggesting a regret that other illustrious women, of whom we have but meagre and unrealizable details, had not been equally fortunate in their portrayers—Joan of Arc, for example, for whom we must content ourselves with generalizations and the spiritual vision of Bastien Lepage.

Returning for a moment to learned women—remembering, as we said above, that the Muses themselves are “violet-tressed”—we find them rather tiresomely indeterminate. Charlotte Brontë, for example, may be classed as intermediate, with “soft, thick brown hair, and peculiar eyes difficult

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

to describe." Sonya Kovalevsky, too, may be characterized, I hope without disrespect, as a Slavonic nondescript, though her countrywoman, Marie Bashkirtseff, in spite of her dark eyebrows, must rank as a militant blonde.

Jane Austen is common-sensibly definite, "a clear brunette, with a rich colour, hazel eyes, and curling brown hair," resembling, we are told, her own Emma Woodhouse. George Eliot is somewhat less definitely blond, "hair pale brown, worn in ringlets, complexion pale, eyes grey-blue." But there is, characteristically, no middle course with George Sand. Of the tragic muse of Chopin and Alfred de Musset, we read :

"Her large dark eyes sparkle with genius, her hair, black as ebony, falls on her shoulders in wavy ringlets."

A few queens may as well be here classified. Catherine de' Medici and Mary Queen of Scots are unmistakable "children of the dark star" ; whereas Cassandra, Guinevere, Isabella of Spain, Elizabeth of England, Marie Antoinette, and Catherine of Russia are all so much capital for the blondes. It may be added of Elizabeth that it has been ungallantly declared that "she wore false hair, and that red." What would Spenser have said to such a libel on his peerless Gloriana? But possibly Spenser was like those twenty-one men of Cincinnati of whom Mr. Finck maliciously tells. These had all married red-haired women, but were found,

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

on examination, to be colour-blind. They had, therefore, mistaken their wives for brunettes!

However, if to love red hair is to be colour-blind, no few poets and painters must have been colour-blind—particularly the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite school. Though many of Rossetti's most impressive faces look out of caves of hair black and mysterious as night—chiefly those he painted from the wonderful face of Mrs. William Morris, one of the world's regal brunettes—yet the inspiring face of his life, the muse of his poetry as well as of his painting, Elizabeth Siddal, first caught his fancy by the wealth of her coppery red hair and her strange blue-green eyes, like those of that queen Alaciél of whom Swinburne sings :

“I am the queen Alaciél.
My mouth was like that moist gold cell
Whereout the thickest honey drips ;
Mine eyes were as a grey-green sea.”

It is a marvellous blond head that lies in the last solemn sleep of Beatrice in “Dante's Dream.”

The poets, as one would expect, are characteristically eclectic in the colour scheme of their loves. It is to be feared that they have frequently proved capable of equally impassioned adoration for blond and brunette beauty, like the French singer quoted above, in one and the same day. Even so grave a poet as Milton—who, in his youth, like Polonius, suffered much extremity from love—was moved alike by dark and fair, though one of his most decisive

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

utterances bears out my suggestion that a man's first love will usually be blond and his last brunette. In one of his Italian sonnets, translated by Cowper, he writes to a friend of a beautiful singer whom he had met during his visit to Italy—Leonora Baroni :

“ Yet think me not thus dazzled by the flow
Of golden locks, or damask rose ; more rare
The heartfelt beauties of my foreign fair ! ”

Yet Milton's two wives appear to have been blondes.

The famous Laura of Petrarch is described as “ a fair, Madonna-like beauty, with soft, dark eyes, and a profusion of pale golden hair parted on her brow and falling in rich curls over her neck.” Another famous Italian blonde was Byron's Countess Guiccioli, though Byron, we know, had a passion for black eyes. Spenser's own personal Elizabeth, whom he married, and whom he celebrates in his lovely “ Epithalamion ” and “ Prothalamion,” was blond, as was the Rosalind of his earlier affection :

“ That golden wire, those sparkling stars so bright
Shall turn to dust, and lose their goodly light.”

That Stella, thinking of whom Sidney wrote his lovely—

“ With how sad steps, O moon, thou climb'st the sky !
How silently, and with how wan a face !—”

—is described with “ dark, sparkling eyes ; pale brown hair ; a rich, vivid complexion.”

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

Another Stella, she of Swift's strange love, was also brunette, “with silky black hair, brilliant eyes, and delicate features”; but in Vanessa Swift seems to have sought for contrast. Pope's Martha Blount was fair, with blue eyes.

Coming again to later days, that versatile lover Heine has thus put himself on record for the brunettes, *à propos* the women of Trent, in the Austrian Tyrol:

“I do love these pale, elegiac faces with the large black eyes that gaze at you so love-sick; I love also the dusk tint of those proud necks which Phœbus already has loved and browned with his kisses.”

Alfred de Musset's Mimi Pinson, need one say, was blond:

“Mimi Pinson est une blonde,
Une blonde que l'on connaît.”

But Musset was young and gay when he sang thus; his tragic muse, as we know, was to come later with George Sand.

Novelists seem, for the most part, to favour brunette heroines, as being more impressive—particularly, though not always, when their stories are tragic, thus following tradition and popular instinct. Take Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, with her “dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam, and a face which, besides being beautiful from the regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes."

Again, Thomas Hardy's Eustacia Vye is the very apotheosis of the brunette. "To see her hair," writes Mr. Hardy, "was to fancy that a whole winter did not contain darkness enough to form its shadow. It closed over her forehead like nightfall extinguishing the western glow." The Dark Lady of Shakespeare's idolatry can hardly have been more Stygian than that.

George Eliot has a fine picture of tragic Hetty Sorrel combing her "dark, hyacinthic" curls before her mirror. Fielding's Sophia was a most unpromising brunette. "Her hair, which was black, was so luxuriant that it reached her middle," and "few could believe it to be her own"; while "her black eyes had a lustre in them which all her softness could not extinguish." Balzac's dangerous "Woman of Thirty" is pictured with "brown tresses and beautiful, almond-shaped dark eyes"; but perhaps the most dangerous woman in fiction, Becky Sharp, is described by Thackeray as "pale, sandy-haired, and with eyes habitually cast down. When they looked up, they were very large, odd, and attractive."

From this desultory survey of preferences, one way and the other, which could be almost indefinitely extended—what conclusion?

It seems to me that only a very hardened or biased generalizer could arrive at any; the historic honours

“EST-ELLE BRUNE? EST-ELLE BLONDE?”

are so evenly distributed. Yet perhaps one does gain a certain impression that, while less showy in some respects than that of the blonde, the record of the brunette is one of more serious and stable values, and that perhaps there is something in the fancy of the old German mystic quoted by Walter Pater, who, speaking of the mystery of so-called “white things,” says that the red rose came first, and that “white things” are “ever an afterthought—the doubles, or seconds, of real things, and themselves but half-real, half-material.”

A greater force and depth, a more stable concreteness, seem to belong to brunette types of things. Dark colours, as we know, represent a greater absorption of the solar energy; what is coal but solidified sunshine? Do the black hair and the brown skin, according to Mr. Finck's idea, represent a greater amount of stored-up sunshine than the gold hair and the white skin, and, therefore, a larger endowment of vital force. Certainly, we involuntarily associate more dynamic qualities with brunette types; and the word “swart,” as applied to men, has usually carried with it the sense of a sort of uncanny physical strength.

From the point of view of beauty, perhaps the ideal type would be that dreamed of by some artists in which blond hair will be combined with dark eyes, eyebrows, and eye-lashes, and skin like “the nut-brown maid.” Nature, of course, does occasionally produce fascinating examples of that

OLD LOVE STORIES RETOLD

type, and perhaps evolution is going in that direction. At all events, those of us who live long enough here in America should see some interesting developments in the course of the next two or three generations.

As with so many old conflicts, America seems to be the natural battle-ground for the final struggle, the Armageddon, in the world-old fight between blonde and brunette, being as it is the melting-pot of races. Every kind of colour is being dashed hourly on the gigantic palette. What will that mysterious artist, Nature, bring out of them all as he blends them in his slap-dash way with the cosmic brush? If he is really on the side of the brunette, America will soon be in a position to tell us; and perhaps time will prove Shakespeare, true prophet in so many things, once more on the winning side when, with his eyes on the mysterious Dark Lady of his sonnets, he wrote:

"In the old time black was not counted fair,
Or, if it were it, it bore not beauty's name;
But now is black beauty's successive heir."

Acc. No.	8121
Class No.	F. 7.
Book No.	358

100-75